The New Criterion

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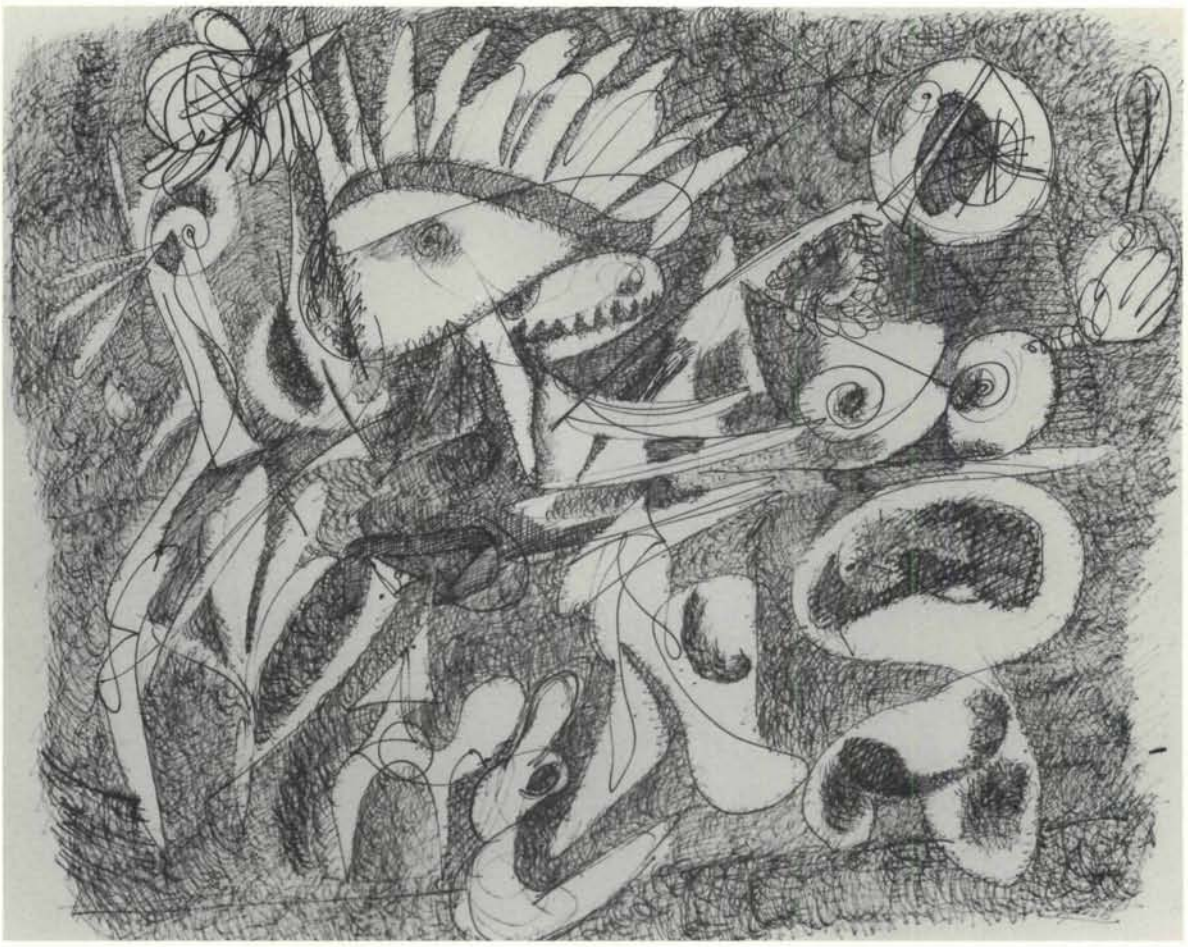

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Roger Kimball wrote on the Motherwell retrospective in the March issue of *The New Criterion.*

Mimi Kramer is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion.*

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William Logan's latest book of poems, *Difficulty,* will be published by David R. Godine in August.

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Sonya Rudikoff is working on a study of Virginia Woolf.

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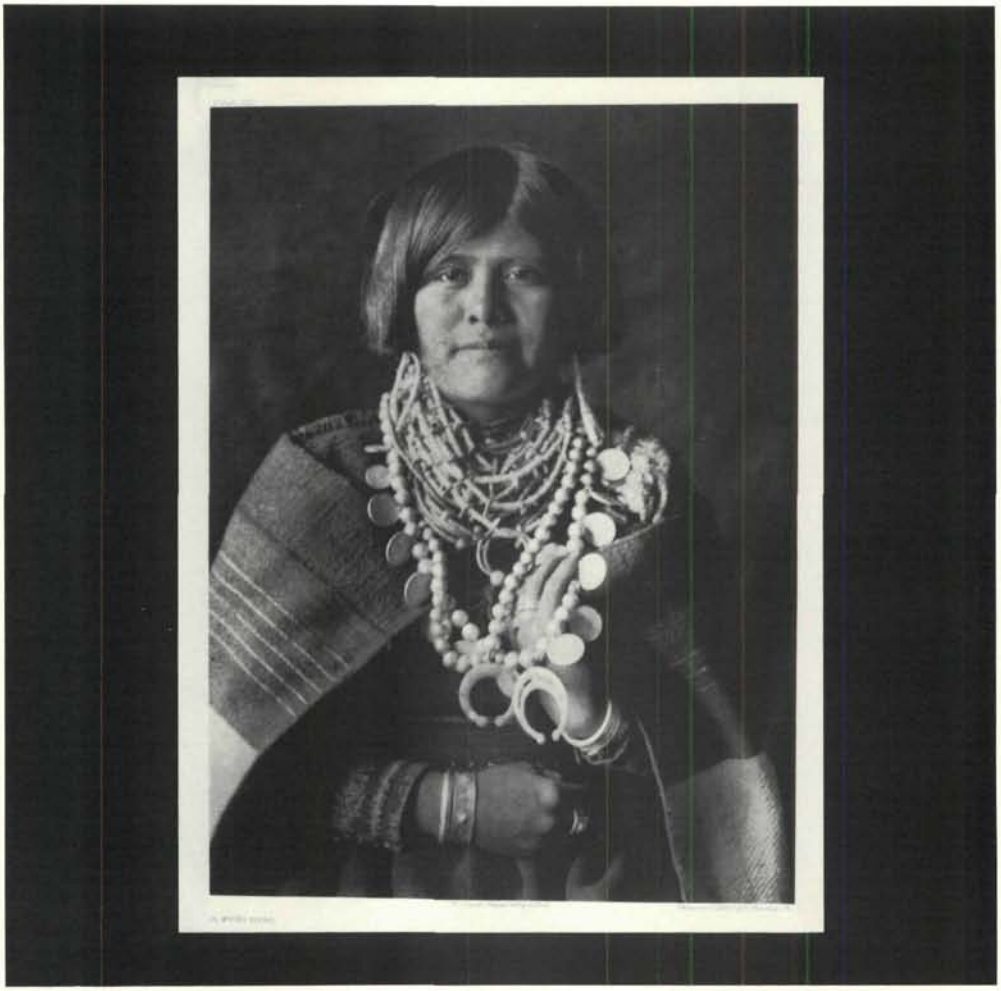

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Kandinsky in Paris

by Hilton Kramer

The exhibition which Christian Derouet has organized at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum under the title, "Kandinsky in Paris: 1934-1944," is the third and final installment in the retrospective series which the museum has devoted to this artist over a period of three years.[1] It differs, however, from its predecessors in one important respect. Unlike "Kandinsky in Munich: 1896-1914" and "Kandinsky: Russian and Bauhaus Years, 1915-1933," the present exhibition does not come to us heavily laden with familiar historical associations. The artist of the Munich period is, of course, a celebrated figure—one of the inventors of abstract painting and the author of an important treatise on the subject, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*; the founder of the *Blaue Reiter* group, and a recognized leader of the international avant-garde. The artist of the Russian and Bauhaus years is likewise a well-known personage in the history of the modern movement—a painter, teacher, and theorist who participated in two of the century's most programmatic efforts to forge a working alliance, first in the Soviet Union and then in Weimar Germany, between modernist aesthetics and revolutionary politics. By comparison with these legendary chapters in the annals of twentieth-century art, the Paris period, which encompasses the last ten years of Kandinsky's life, has remained a relatively obscure one. It may thus be said to harbor the work of a neglected, if not indeed an "unknown," artist.

Vasily Kandinsky's is certainly not the first name that comes to mind when we think of art in Paris in the 1930s. This is a decade we tend to identify with Picasso and González, with Miró, Giacometti, and the Surrealists, with Bonnard and the young Balthus. We may be aware of the struggle waged by certain groups to establish the authority of abstract art in Paris in the Thirties, but even in that movement, which met with much resistance, Kandinsky's role cannot be said to have been a major one. He came to Paris as a refugee from Hitler's Germany, and he did not have an easy time establishing himself in the French art world. He had little connection with the School of Paris, and Paris in those days took scant notice of artists who lived outside the orbit of its influence. To the modernist art of Germany, where Kandinsky had made his reputation, the French were especially disinclined to grant critical recognition. Kandinsky himself was acknowledged to be an avant-garde eminence, of course, but he was nonetheless obliged to tread his way very carefully in a milieu in which he could take nothing for granted and which was in many

1 "Kandinsky in Paris," organized by Christian Derouet, opened at the Guggenheim Museum on February 15 and remains on view there through April 14. It will then travel to the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas (June 8-August 11) and the Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts in Vienna, Austria (Fall 1985).

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ways deeply alien to his outlook. He had no interest in the figurative art which was then winning so much acclaim. He was opposed to the influence of the Communist Party, which was considerable, and he was scarcely more sympathetic to the doctrines of the Surrealists (even though they accorded him a certain welcome). He seemed, in fact, to fit comfortably into none of the factions which governed the Paris art world at that time. In 1934, moreover, Kandinsky was sixty-seven years old, and he had to worry about making a living for his wife and himself. Recognition was therefore essential to their survival, and for this reason he was obliged to be extremely discreet about voicing his true opinions about the artistic and political situation in which he now found himself.

He remained, all the same, an amazingly productive artist in this last decade of his life. Vivian Endicott Barnett, the curator of the Guggenheim, reports that "During this last decade Kandinsky completed one hundred and forty-four oil paintings and more than two hundred and fifty watercolors and gouaches in addition to producing several hundred drawings." He wasn't content, either, with merely repeating his past triumphs. He attempted to do something new —new for him, anyway—by introducing a vein of "scientific" imagery which had not theretofore been seen in his work. He also adapted certain ideas found in the work of his contemporaries, especially Miró and Arp. Neither development, it must be said, contributed to the advancement of his reputation. He remained an isolated figure—respected but outside the mainstream as far as French art life was concerned. The French granted him citizenship in 1939, but it was in Switzerland and the United States that the major exhibitions of his work were organized in the final decade of his long career. It wasn't until Kandinsky had long been dead and his widow had established a sizable repository of his work and his papers at the Pompidou Center in Paris that the French finally claimed him as one of "their" masters.

Even in New York, however, where certain of Kandinsky's pictures of the Thirties have long been familiar to us in the Guggenheim's extensive collection of his work, the art of the Paris period has rarely, if ever, been taken to belong to the artist's most important achievements. It has been difficult, in any case, to get the work of this period clearly in focus. Knoedler's mounted an exhibition of the Paris pictures in 1969, but not until the present survey have we been given a systematic account of the artist's development in the last decade of his life. The result is in some respects surprising. What we tend to look for in an artist's late work—some sort of grand summation or distillation of the themes that have occupied him for a lifetime, or some transcendent move beyond them—is simply not to be found in the late Kandinskys. Instead we find an artist who was in some sense attempting to start over—an artist in search of some new foundation upon which to base the aesthetics of abstract painting. There are no dramatic disavowals, to be sure, and the links that join the late work to the work of the Twenties are easily traced. But something important has nonetheless changed in the work of the Thirties, and this is the first exhibition to make the nature of the change altogether clear to us.

What that change consisted of, I believe, was a final abandonment of the utopian impulse in Kandinsky's art. The artist who emerges from this exhibition is no longer possessed of a transcendent vision for the redemption of either society or the soul. He is an artist chastened by history—an artist looking for a way to anchor his art to something deeper and more fundamental than the vagaries of cultural life. In a sense, of course, this had been Kandinsky's aspiration from the beginning. The entire assumption on which *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* was based is that art, in order to realize its exalted spiritual destiny, must find the means of freeing itself from the material accidents and illusions of earthly life. This indeed was to be the philosophical mission of abstract art in our time: to liberate human consciousness from the thralldom of mate-

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rial appearances and thereby hasten the coming of a new spiritual epoch.

Yet no sooner had Kandinsky proclaimed his faith in this heady doctrine, which derived from the theosophical writings of Madame Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, Annie Besant, and other true believers in the occult, than he found himself forced by the outbreak of the First World War to grapple with the material consequences of history in the starkest terms. As a Russian national residing in Germany he had no choice but to uproot himself from the scene of his greatest artistic triumphs and return to his native land. There he was soon caught up in the maelstrom of the Revolution that was to transform Russia into a totalitarian state.

From the perspective of the 1980s, nothing seems clearer than the fact that a revolution of this sort would spell the doom of all the ideas and aspirations which Kandinsky held most dear. Yet at the onset of the Bolshevik Revolution many modernist artists had reason to believe otherwise, and Kandinsky was one of them. History had taken an unexpected turn, and modernist art was suddenly in a position of power. It was quickly made part of the officially sponsored culture of the new Soviet state, and Kandinsky joined enthusiastically in the effort to overhaul the entire art life of the country along modernist lines. Though he never became a Communist, he enjoyed immense prestige as a prophet of the new abstraction. He was therefore given official positions, and became in fact a cultural bureaucrat and teacher. The whole experiment proved to be short-lived, of course. By 1922 it was at an end, the casualty of a shift in Communist Party policy. But by that date Kandinsky had left Russia—he clearly saw what was coming—and had re-established residence in Germany, where he promptly joined the faculty of the Bauhaus.

It should be noted, however, that during this brief period Kandinsky was himself deeply influenced by the abstract art then being created by the artists of the Russian avant-garde, for theirs was far more radical than his own had ever been in eliminating all traces of Expressionist practice and concentrating on geometrical form. Interestingly, Kandinsky did not fully explore this more geometrical mode of abstraction and make it his own until he had left Russia and joined the Bauhaus. But a change in the direction of his art was already apparent even before he departed his native land for the last time.

As was usually the case with Kandinsky, changes in pictorial form signified some larger alteration in his philosophical outlook. To his fundamentally mystical view of art Kandinsky's brief but intense involvement in the Soviet cultural establishment in the early years of the Revolution added an element of utopian aspiration, and it was this combination of the mystical and the utopian which persisted in his art as a kind of sub-text for the duration of the Bauhaus period. In the history of modernist painting the geometrical tradition is the utopian tradition, postulating an ideal rather than a quotidian order of existence. It was this tradition, with its tacit endorsement of a radical social agenda, which the Bauhaus inherited directly from the Russian avant-garde, and it was at the Bauhaus that the tradition itself was most fully developed into a pedagogical system. In that process Kandinsky played an important role, yet there was always a part of his sensibility which remained resolutely aloof from the social mission of the Bauhaus. The principal theoretical work he published in the Bauhaus period—the treatise called *Point and Line to Plane*—is completely devoid of social philosophy of any sort. Kandinsky remained a mystical artist, more at home with metaphysical doctrine and aesthetic analysis than with theories of social reconstruction, and it was to the mystical side of his sensibility that the utopian aspect of the Bauhaus program made its primary appeal.

Still, it may legitimately be asked how an artist of Kandinsky's mystical disposition, an artist who stood adamantly opposed to all materialist theories of art, could have reconciled himself, first in Russia and then in Germany, to assisting in the implementation of socio-aesthetic programs that were

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nothing if not materialist in the very ideologies they espoused. The answer to this question lies, I believe, precisely in that community of interest which, in certain moments of historical crisis, mystics and utopians are often found to share with the most hard-headed apparatchiks. However much their ultimate goals may differ, they are similarly inspired by a passionate attachment to an ideal that rejects the present, with all of its inadequacies, in favor of some distant but perfect future. In the hope of achieving that visionary future, much that is distasteful or contradictory can be overlooked, or at least tolerated, for the benefit of the higher interest. What for the bureaucrat is likely to be a program designed to yield a practical result here and now, for the mystic and the utopian is all too easily seen as a means of bringing us one step closer to an imagined millennium. It is in the very nature of revolutionary ideology to induce this intermingling of the practical and the mystical, and wiser men than Vasily Kandinsky have been known to succumb to its blandishments.

Kandinsky was by no means the only artist of a mystical disposition, moreover, to find in the ferment of the Revolution a promise of the spiritual renewal he so ardently yearned for. Kasimir Malevich and virtually the entire Suprematist circle were likewise followers of the occult who eagerly assimilated the professed goals of the Revolution to their notions of mystical redemption. Hard as it may be for us to lend credence to these beliefs today, in the world inhabited by Kandinsky and his contemporaries the aesthetics of abstract art was closely tied to such ideas and is not finally comprehensible in isolation from them.

Some knowledge of this history is essential, in any case, if we are to understand the artist whose work is now presented to us in the "Kandinsky in Paris" exhibition. The artist we meet with in this exhibition is a figure in flight from the most catastrophic political events of the modern era. The countries in which he has passed most of his adult life, countries which he knew as cosmopolitan centers of artistic and intellectual enlightenment, have entered upon the dark night of totalitarian terror. Many of his most esteemed contemporaries, with whom he had once joined in exalted aesthetic endeavors, are now either dead, silenced, or, like himself, living in exile and facing an uncertain fate. He has found refuge—but for how long he cannot know—in one of the last places in Europe where the artist is free for the moment to pursue his vocation without coercion or constraint. The great world of advanced European culture, with its audacious ideas and internationalist outlook—a world that in his youth reached from Moscow and St. Petersburg to Rome and Munich and Paris and London and even beyond the Atlantic to New York—has dwindled to a few vulnerable enclaves, and will dwindle still further in the years which remain to him.

Against this bleak background, Kandinsky in the last decade of his life exhibits an extraordinary spiritual stamina and artistic will. Although disabused of whatever political illusions he may have entertained in the past, he remains steadfast in his commitment to the essential principles of his art. At the same time, he recognizes that he is now alone. No longer part of a group or a collective artistic enterprise, as to one degree or another he had been from the days of the *Blaue Reiter* to those of the Bauhaus, he sets out to discover new sources and new forms for his art. In that search he finds himself increasingly drawn to a new subject matter, which is mainly derived from the literature of biological illustration. In Vivian Endicott Barnett's essay on "Kandinsky and Science: The Introduction of Biological Images in the Paris Period" for the catalogue of the exhibition—the most important contribution to Kandinsky studies since the publication of Sixten Ringbom's *The Sounding Cosmos* in 1970—this development is described in detail for the first time.

> In 1934 [Mrs. Barnett writes] there is a remarkable incidence in [Kandinsky's] painting of images of amoebas, embryos, larvae and

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> marine invertebrates, as well as leaf forms and punctuation marks . . . . Once established, his new iconography is continued and elaborated upon throughout his Paris work.

Kandinsky was certainly conscious of the fact that this development marked a new beginning for his art. The first of the paintings in which he employed amoeboid shapes was called *Start* (1934); it was the first painting he executed in Paris. And Mrs. Barnett is surely right in observing that "It is especially significant that this most elemental stage of life is depicted in a work of art titled *Start.* The concurrence of image and meaning cannot be accidental."[2]

Yet if the imagery and the title of *Start* signified a new beginning for Kandinsky—and perhaps, in his mind, for abstract art itself—both his new subject matter and the use he made of it were in many important respects consistent with his earlier interests. Illustrations drawn from the study of biology and astronomy were among the images reproduced in *Point and Line to Plane,* which Kandinsky wrote in the Twenties. But he was not then ready to make direct use of such images in his painting, which was still at that time largely governed by the geometrical-utopian mode. The metaphysical attitude he now brought to this "scientific" imagery had also been defined in one of the statements he made in *Point and Line to Plane.* "Not everything is visible and tangible," he wrote, "or—to be more explicit—under the visible and comprehensible lies the invisible and incomprehensible." This interest in the invisible that lay hidden in the world of appearances remained a fundamental element in Kandinsky's art to the end.

It was to be the paradoxical function of abstract painting, as Kandinsky envisioned it, to make the invisible visible. (Paul Klee once said something similar about his own aims as an artist.) But now the realm of the invisible to which painting addressed itself was no longer to be discovered exclusively in the world of mind or spirit. Nature, too—or at least those aspects of nature which scientists studied with the camera and the microscope—was found to harbor a vast repository of images which are more or less invisible to the naked eye and thus lie well beyond the world of material appearances which Kandinsky had long before banished from his painting. And it was very largely upon this repository of hidden images in nature—which, in the use he made of them in his painting, came to signify for Kandinsky a new synthesis of art, life, and spirit—that the work of his final years was based.

There is something immensely poignant, I think, about this development in Kandinsky's painting—this yearning to attach his art to the most primordial forms of life at the very moment when the civilization which had nurtured him was being systematically destroyed. It was, in its way, a death-defying gesture, and all the more heroic for being made in a milieu which could not be counted on to understand or support what it signified. And yet, as much as one admires the aspiration which animates this art and the heroic spirit with which it is pursued, the hard questions must nonetheless be asked: What does it all add up to? Now that we are more closely acquainted with the work of the last decade and its sources have been minutely explicated—Mrs. Barnett provides a virtual Baedeker to those sources, and Christian Derouet has much to tell us about the critical reception of the work and the conditions of its creation—what kind of achievement does it appear to be? How does it compare to Kandinsky's earlier and more famous work, and what did it finally contribute to the history of abstract art?

Mr. Derouet, the curator in charge of the Kandinsky archives at the Pompidou Center, adopts a rather smug tone in dealing with those writers—especially Clement Greenberg and the late Alfred Barr—who found in the work of the last decade a distinct decline in quality and interest from the artist's earlier achievements. But were they altogether

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2 *Kandinsky in Paris,* with a preface by Thomas M. Messer and essays by Christian Derouet and Vivian Endicott Barnett, is published by the Guggenheim Museum (paperback, 268 pages, $19.50).

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wrong in that judgment? And does Mr. Derouet really disagree with it? He notes with satisfaction that "Frank Stella has attempted, in recent lectures at Harvard . . . to reevaluate Kandinsky's Parisian period," but Mr. Derouet does not essay that task himself—a curious dereliction of critical duty in a curator who has made himself a specialist in the subject. The truth is, from his introduction to the catalogue of this exhibition we can have no idea of what Mr. Derouet actually thinks of Kandinsky's late work. The inference to be drawn, I suppose, is that it would be an embarrassment for him to be candid on the subject. But this is by no means the only curiosity to be found in Mr. Derouet's essay—a matter to which we shall return.

The problem to be faced by critics of Kandinsky's Paris paintings is this: Although biological imagery provided the artist with a new and significant subject matter in this period, it could not in itself give him the pictorial means of dealing with it, and for that he was obliged to turn to the work of other artists—most notably Miró and Arp. To what extent, then, did Kandinsky succeed in creating a new pictorial idiom in this last phase of his development? Or did this last phase remain something of a pastiche?

In his book on *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), Alfred Barr had said of Kandinsky that "in the last few years he has turned to more organic forms, perhaps under the influence of the younger Parisians, Miró and Arp, to whom he pointed the way twenty years before." Understandably, Kandinsky was deeply hurt by that judgment. What artist in his position wouldn't be? Yet Barr was essentially correct, and on this matter, too—that is, what Kandinsky owed to the pictorial inventions of others in his work of the Thirties—Mrs. Barnett proves to be an excellent guide. The question, moreover, is not simply one of "influence," but of what results from it. And on this matter it must be said that Kandinsky, while he continued to produce pictures that were far above the common run of abstract painting in the Paris of his day, rarely succeeded in this period in creating work that can be seriously compared with the best of Miró or Arp.

I think this organic-biomorphic vein of abstraction called for an element of the personal, a play of erotic fancy, which it was not in Kandinsky's nature to bring into his art. Organic form is all too clearly a mode of ideation in his work; it lacks the kind of conviction which comes from direct and spontaneous feeling. It lacks, indeed, that sense of "inner necessity" which had been the hallmark of Kandinsky's earlier achievements. And so, while Kandinsky was incapable of turning this mode of abstraction into the kind of academic exercise that it became for so many lesser artists on the Paris scene in the Thirties—as we can see from the representation of these artists which Mr. Derouet has provided for this occasion—he could never quite succeed, either, in making it the vehicle of his greatest gifts. In his strongest paintings of this period—*Circuit* (1939), for example, and *The Whole* (1940)—he is obliged to return to the geometrical mode in order to achieve a coherent and persuasive structure. Wherever he relies exclusively on a biomorphic idiom à la Miró and Arp for that purpose—as in *Black Forms on White* (1934) or the later *Sky Blue* (1940)—the work suffers a fatal loss of energy and conviction. Certain other pictures—*Accompanied Center* (1937) is probably the best of them—are virtual anthologies of the problems Kandinsky encountered in his repeated attempts to bring the biomorphic idiom into alignment with a formal structure that was sufficiently complex and hierarchical to satisfy him. Simplicity of statement of the kind that Miró and Arp could often achieve with a wonderful flight of lyric grace was rarely Kandinsky's forte. He was, perhaps, too much of an intellectual—and I mean as a painter—to feel entirely at ease with the kind of simplicity or "play" that came so naturally to others.

Finally, a word about Mr. Derouet's curious introduction to the work of this period. I have already noted that he offers no critical view of the work himself. (He does offer us

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an interesting glimpse of Frank Stella's view of late Kandinsky, but for a critical consideration of that view we shall have to wait for the publication of Mr. Stella's Norton lectures.) About Kandinsky the man—at least in this period—Mr. Derouet clearly entertains some reservations, even a certain antipathy, especially on political grounds. He is discomforted, for example, by Kandinsky's anti-Communist utterances. Yet the statements he quotes from the artist have not only been amply borne out by the historical record but show Kandinsky to have been a shrewd analyst of the political situation. Consider what he said about the catastrophic consequences of Stalin's forced collectivization of agriculture in the early Thirties:

> The political situation in Russia worried him [Mr. Derouet writes], and although he was usually very circumspect about politics, he let himself go in clearly anti-Communist remarks —as in this letter to his nephew [the philosopher Alexandre Kojève] dated October 6, 1932: "It seems things are going very badly in Russia. They're expecting a real famine. And so, as in a bad pun, instead of coming to a station called 'prosperity for all,' they unexpectedly arrive at 'annihilation of all.' But I do not hold out much hope that the logically minded materialists will come a cropper once and for all."

And about Kandinsky's position four years later Mr. Derouet writes:

> By 1936, adopting an attitude that was common enough then but somewhat short on analysis and comprehension, [Kandinsky] lumped together Communists and Fascists, criticizing the Moscow trials and the Führer's auto da fés.

Was it really a "common" attitude in Parisian intellectual life in 1936 to make this kind of equation between Communists and Fascists? And wasn't Kandinsky correct, after all, in his criticism of the Moscow trials and Hitler's programmed terror? Alas, it is Mr. Derouet—not Kandinsky—who suffers from a woeful incapacity to comprehend these issues. He seems to be under the impression that Kandinsky's intense interest in André Gide's book about his visit to the Soviet Union, *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.,* published in 1936, derived from the artist's "outdated, picturesque images" of his native country rather than from the political realities which Gide accurately reported in that courageous book. What Mr. Derouet actually gives us in his commentary on Kandinsky's politics is, I am afraid, only a distant echo—half a century later!—of the complacent leftist attitudes which made French intellectual life so distasteful to the artist at the time.

Underlying this political bias on Mr. Derouet's part is still another—his wish to rehabilitate the French avant-garde of the Thirties in order to save it from the critical denigration it has suffered at the hands of American criticism. This is no doubt a legitimate subject for an art historian, but is a monograph on the late work of Vasily Kandinsky really the proper place in which to explore it? I hardly think so. The result, in any case, is a text which is cluttered with a great many historical irrelevancies and which, at the same time, steadfastly ignores much that is worth discussing.

Mr. Derouet acknowledges that his essay "has more to do with history than with aesthetics." And while he never openly identifies the nature of the historical inquiry he is conducting, its governing agenda will not be lost, I think, on any reader acquainted with other recent efforts to rewrite the history of art in Paris and New York in the Thirties and Forties. What, after all, was the single most important development to occur in the history of art in this period if it was not the decline of Paris and the emergence of New York as the art capital of the Western world? That this development should prove to be unwelcome in Paris is entirely understandable. No doubt many Romans once felt a similar combination of anguish, resentment, and envy when Rome lost its place as the center of Western artistic thought. But such feelings of resentment and envy, especially when politicized, are

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obviously a perilous foundation on which to base a study of art history. What the efforts of historical revisionists like Mr. Derouet amount to is an attempt to repeal the actualities of art history, first of all by discrediting the criticism which chronicled this fateful shift from Paris to New York and then by claiming that the emergence of New York as an international art capital had far more to do with politics—especially the politics of the Cold War—than with artistic achievements. The canonical text in this revisionist project is Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), and we should therefore not be surprised that Mr. Derouet makes a respectful reference to it even while acknowledging that the book "concerns Paris only indirectly." What Mr. Derouet does not say is that his own essay is designed, in part, to buttress Mr. Gilbaut's debunking analysis of the New York School—an analysis, by the way, written from a Marxist perspective and also having "more to do with history [that is, political history] than with aesthetics."

Who could guess, from Mr. Derouet's essay, that the artist he is writing about was becoming in the very period he is discussing the object of a cult in New York; that this cult status would result in the creation of an institution—what is now called the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum—which in its origins was largely to be devoted to the art and the ideas of Kandinsky; and that this process had an enormous influence on the formation of the New York School? It is in this respect, too, that Mr. Derouet's politics have been allowed to damage—and damage seriously—his account of the artist's final decade. How odd it is that the Guggenheim Museum has allowed itself to be made to collaborate in this curious distortion of its own history. Perhaps it was the price that the Guggenheim felt it had to pay in order to secure the cooperation of the Pompidou Center in organizing this exhibition, which would have been impossible without the material drawn from the Kandinsky collection and archives in Paris.

"Kandinsky in Paris" is said to be the final installment in the Guggenheim's retrospective survey of Kandinsky's achievements. Yet the story of those achievements remains, in at least one respect, incomplete. For we have not been given the last chapter, which might very well be called "Kandinsky in New York," and which would trace the course of Kandinsky's influence on American painting down to the present day. An exhibition devoted to that subject might do much to correct the distortions and omissions to be found in Mr. Derouet's myopic monograph.

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The outrageous Mr. Wu

by Joseph Epstein

In his inevitably charming essay "Quia Imperfectum," Max Beerbohm proposed a museum composed of incomplete masterpieces, which would include among other items Penelope's web, the original drawings for the Tower of Babel, the manuscripts of *Edwin Drood* and "Kubla Kahn," the fragments from Racine's "Iphigénie," and the blank spaces and bare pedestals for the paintings and statues that Michelangelo planned but never completed for the Baptistery of San Lorenzo. I wonder if I might suggest yet another item for inclusion, that of the quite scrappy notes for an essay that George Orwell had hoped to write about Evelyn Waugh before death, the ultimate deadline, arrived to rescind all others in Orwell's active journalistic career. Like the other items in Beerbohm's museum dedicated to enshrinement of the incomplete, a full-blown George Orwell essay on Evelyn Waugh does seem deliciously promising. One imagines that essay to have been a lengthy piece of work, on the model of Orwell's essays on Dickens or Kipling, pellucid, shimmering with good sense, and slicing to the core of Waugh's art as no other writer has thus far been able to do. "Sorry," as certain rather sadistic practitioners of the science of librarianship have been known exuberantly to exclaim, "but that work is not available."

A very great deal has been written about the art of Evelyn Waugh: the recently published *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage* runs to over five hundred pages[1]; Christopher Sykes's friendly but not uncritical biography of Waugh has long been in print; and a weighty volume of Waugh's letters, an even weightier one of his diaries, and now *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*[2] have all appeared. One nonetheless feels that, even though all the pieces are now on the board, no one has quite succeeded in assembling the puzzle presented by this extraordinary writer and his enchanting art. Strip away what one takes to be his mask and one discovers another under it and then yet another under that one. So much seems to interpose itself between his literary career and our understanding of it, not least the preposterous persona he sedulously erected for himself. Yet this much can be said at the outset: A man afflicted by boredom his life long, he unfailingly avoided passing boredom on to his readers. If there is a serious writer in this century who has given more pleasure to his readers than Evelyn Waugh, I cannot think of his name.

One doesn't think of modern literature as strenuously devoted to purveying pleasure. Complexity, yes; seriousness, often; a certain jokiness, occasionally. But pleasure of the kind available in the art of Evelyn Waugh

1 *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage,* edited by Martin Stannard: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 537 pages, $36.

2 *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh,* edited by Donat Gallagher: Little, Brown; 672 pages, $40.

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is very rare. I do not mean to imply that aesthetic pleasure of the highest order isn't abundantly available in such modern writers as Joyce and Proust, T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens; obviously, it is. But in the work of Evelyn Waugh high aesthetic pleasure—he was a consummate artist, the masculine elegance of whose prose is unrivaled in our time—is combined with pleasure such as only a comic genius can provide. Evelyn Waugh's comedy has had many followers—such British group efforts as "Beyond the Fringe," "That Was the Week That Was," and, on a cruder level, "Monty Python's Flying Circus" are quite unthinkable without the precedent of Waugh—but no successful imitators. There are two reasons why there has never been a convincing parody of Evelyn Waugh: first, no one else is quite that funny, and second, no one else can write quite that well.

Evelyn Waugh's friend John Sutro coined the word "Wavian"—on the model of Shavian for George Bernard Shaw—to apply to the distinctive comedy of Evelyn Waugh. It is comedy that cannot be explained but only displayed. Samples available without request: On our first encountering Waugh's bounder-hero Basil Seal, nearly a third of the way into the novel *Black Mischief,* he is coming awake the morning after a great binge on the sofa of what is to him a totally strange flat. Waugh notes:

> There was a gramophone playing. A lady in a dressing jacket sat in an armchair by the gas fire, eating sardines from the tin with a shoe horn . . .

Stop the cameras here. That lady eating sardines from the tin with a shoehorn is a pure Wavian touch. So, too, is the following sentence from the first and only installment of Waugh's autobiography, *A Little Learning,* which appears in the chapter in which the author recounts his days at Lancing, his public school: "Apart from general malevolence and particular cruelty, we were not vicious." Finally, from the thesaurus of Wavian anecdotes, Christopher Sykes, in his biography, reports visiting Waugh in the hospital, where he found him grumbling in great pain in the aftermath of an operation for piles. Attempting to solace his friend, Sykes remarked that he assumed the operation, painful though it might seem now, was in any case necessary.

"No," Waugh replied," the operation was not necessary, but might conceivably have become so later on."

"Not necessary?" said Sykes. "Then why did you have it done?"

"Perfectionism."

Sacha Guitry said that a successful joke requires three people: the person who tells it, the person who appreciates it, and the person who doesn't get it. In its whimsy, in its obliquity, sometimes in its cruelty, Evelyn Waugh's comedy is not for everyone. But those who do appreciate it, appreciate it hugely—can scarcely, in fact, get enough of it. Waugh was a man with a ferocious appetite for the ridiculous, and, with his observant eye, he never went hungry for long. In his writing, if not always in his life, he possessed the gift of viewing everything as if from a great distance, *sub specie aeternitatis*—under the aspect, that is, of eternity, from which aspect nearly everything humankind does is of course ridiculous, absurd, comical.

But the comedy of Evelyn Waugh would not have been possible if not dressed out in his carefully measured prose. That prose is the straight face from behind which the smashing punch lines are delivered. There is nothing flashy or idiosyncratic about Waugh's prose style. It has a precision and a delicacy of syntax that elides into an elegance of its own—the elegance of absolute correctness. He commanded a concision that, combined with his towering contempt for cliché, permitted him to write with dead-on directness. He had an interesting though not flamboyant vocabulary, which he was able to assemble in charming juxtapositions (writing of the "desperate levity" of his youth) and unexpected locutions (college bills at this time of desperate levity "engorged his allowance") that gave it a continual freshness. Like his friend Ronald

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Knox, he was said to have known the exact meaning and derivation of every word he used; perhaps it was this that lent his language its weight and authority. As a writer he thought of himself as a craftsman, and he enjoyed bringing to book those who practiced shoddily the craft he revered. Of a sloppily written book by Harold Laski, Waugh noted that Laski was "so set on preaching the dignity of labour that he shirks his own work." Of another slapdash prose writer, Stephen Spender, Waugh writes: "to see him fumbling with our rich and delicate language is to experience all the horror of seeing a Sèvres vase in the hands of a chimpanzee."

In *A Little Learning* Waugh wrote that he remembered no Greek and read no Latin for pleasure, yet claimed a great debt to his youthful classical studies for such skill as he had as a prose writer: "only by them can a boy fully understand that a sentence is a logical construction and that words have basic inalienable meanings, departure from which is either conscious metaphor or inexcusable vulgarity." But more than a grounding in classical studies is required to make an Evelyn Waugh; there were also his fastidiousness and his devilish (I use this word with some forethought) powers of comic formulation. Who but Evelyn Waugh could have devised, as a euphemism for Harold Acton's homosexuality, the phrasing, he "did not fret for female society"? Who but he, in one of his travel books, *Remote People,* could describe two young Germans encountered in Aden as speaking "English, one rather better than the other, but both very fluently, loudly, and unintelligibly." "Proper words in proper places," as Swift famously said, "make the true definition of a style." Waugh knew the proper words and he knew their proper places; he also knew that style, which he thought derived from the conflation of lucidity, elegance, and individuality, was the great preservative of literary art—that which allowed it to live beyond its time.

But then neither Evelyn Waugh's comic genius nor the high quality of his prose has ever been in serious dispute. What is disputed is the use he made of his gifts. There is, to begin with, very little agreement about which are Waugh's best books, why his literary career took the shape it did, or what in summation his nearly forty years of literary effort come to. Edmund Wilson, for example, a great admirer of Waugh's early novels, bailed out on him with the publication of *Brideshead Revisited.* Claiming that this novel "has been a bitter blow to this critic," Wilson, himself always a bit of the village atheist, could neither understand nor endure the Catholicism at the center of the novel. George Orwell, who reviewed, briefly, Waugh's slender novel *Scott-King's Modern Europe,* though properly appreciative of Waugh's skill, was troubled by his politics, and ended his review by suggesting that the author "occasionally turn aside to read a sixpenny pamphlet on Marxism." Christopher Sykes thought *Unconditional Surrender,* the third volume of Waugh's World War II trilogy, *Sword of Honor,* his great masterpiece, while the full trilogy for Kingsley Amis finally neither coheres nor convinces. Martin Green is keenest on Waugh's early novels (excepting *A Handful of Dust* and *The Loved One*), while V. S. Pritchett, an admirer of Waugh's early novels, nonetheless felt that his later novels, particularly *Sword of Honor,* marked an "advance toward a compassionate study of human nature." Clearly, Evelyn Waugh's is not a case in which one can accuse the critics of being in collusion.

Such a critical dissensus has its own interesting implications. It implies, for one thing, that Evelyn Waugh's literary reputation, even now, is far from settled; it implies, for another, that Waugh's work is of a kind that critics feel they can pick and choose from: accepting the Waugh they approve and setting aside the Waugh they disapprove. Perhaps we all do that with authors whom we wish to admire in spite of their holding to ideas that we find uncongenial. (Supposing literature to be a luncheonette, my order is for Dostoevsky, hold the anti-Semitism and Russian Orthodox Christianity.) But with Evelyn Waugh this

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isn't so easy. It tends to be standard practice to admire the early Waugh while deploring the later, attributing his falling off to his conversion to Catholicism and his deepened reactionaryism. In this reading one admires Waugh's prose style and comic high jinks and leaves the ideas that propel them aside. "It is the business of literature," Desmond MacCarthy once said, "to turn facts into ideas." But Waugh's critics usually either ignore his ideas or set out to attack them for the stirring reason that they disagree with their own. Others choose not to confront those ideas.

The first fact to recognize—a fact wrapped in an idea—is that Evelyn Waugh was a true reactionary. "A reactionary," according to a sprightly definition by Kenneth Minogue, "is someone with a clear and comprehensive vision of an ideal world we have lost." Reactionaryism obviously has a political component, but its politics, in an artist, need not be primary. In her book, *Evelyn Waugh, Portrait of a Country Neighbor,* Frances Donaldson remarks that "Evelyn suffered permanently and terribly from nostalgia," and recalls him once telling her, apropos of his not voting in general elections, "The Conservative Party has never put back the clock a single second." He adored the architecture of every century but his own. An essay he wrote in 1955 entitled "The Death of Painting" begins: "'From today painting is dead,' cried Paul Delaroche in 1839, when first shown a daguerreotype. He spoke too soon." He also wrote: "I think it is time we made up our minds that poetry is one of the arts which has died in the last eighty years." Nothing seemed more absurd to Waugh than whoring after modernity. "There is an unhappy man in Paris called M. Cocteau whose whole life is occupied in trying to be modern," he wrote in 1930, when he was himself only twenty-seven.

Scratch a reactionary and you will find a right-winger—as Christopher Sykes says, Waugh had an "instinctual aversion to all social progress"—but scratch him a little harder and you will find a romantic. It is well to recall that Evelyn Waugh's first published book was a study of Rossetti. The archetypical Waugh hero, from Paul Pennyfeather of *Decline and Fall* through Tony Last of *A Handful of Dust* to the eponymous hero of *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* is a romantic—and a romantic who, not to put too fine a point on it, gets it in the neck. Not much of a century for romanticism, the twentieth, or so Evelyn Waugh, in his novels, kept pointing out.

This knowledge did not make Waugh any less a romantic; it did, however, make him an extremely interesting one. A romantic is drawn to the heroic, which Waugh was. But he, Waugh, was even more powerfully drawn to the ridiculous. One does not regularly think of the romantic and the ridiculous commingling in the work of a single writer. In Waugh it did. His sense of the ridiculous was nearly all-pervading; to it he owed much of the delight and penetration of his art. Even critics who despised all that he seemed to stand for allowed that he was a greatly gifted man. This did not stop critics from attacking him personally. In 1947, in a letter to Nancy Mitford, Waugh wrote that most of the reviews of his novel *Scott-King's Modern Europe* "instead of being about the book, have been about me, saying I am ill-tempered and self-infatuated . . . . Would you say I was a very ill-tempered and self-infatuated man? It hurts."

Having recently read through Christopher Sykes's biography and Waugh's own *Letters* and *Diaries,* I should say that he was not at all self-infatuated but very ill-tempered indeed. He obviously knew this to be the case. Gilbert Pinfold asks, "Why does everyone except me find it so easy to be nice?"; and the narrator of the brilliant but unfinished novel entitled *Work Suspended* remarks, "I am afraid you greatly overrate my good nature," a thing not many people who knew him were ever likely to do to Evelyn Waugh. He suffered fools not at all, yet boredom frequently—and excruciatingly. Boredom to Waugh was, like a disease, palpable in its effects. In *Work Suspended* he has his narrator say of another character that he was "still smarting with the ruthless boredom of my

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last two or three meetings with him." *Ruthless boredom*—that is a juxtaposition only an acute sufferer could contrive. Off in Yugoslavia during World War II, Waugh could—and did—scold his second wife for the dullness of her letters:

> Darling Laura, sweet whiskers, do try to write me better letters. Your last, dated 19 December received today, so eagerly expected, was a bitter disappointment. Do realize that a letter need not be a bald chronicle of events; I know you lead a dull life now, my heart bleeds for it, though I believe you could make it more interesting if you had the will. But that is no reason to make your letters as dull as your life. I simply am not interested in Bridget's children. Do grasp that. A letter should be a form of conversation; write as though you were talking to me.

To the ardent boredom that always loomed on his horizon Waugh joined a bullying streak, an oddly detached strain of motiveless cruelty that remained with him all his life. Cecil Beaton, who attended the same preparatory school as Waugh, recalled the boyish Evelyn Waugh as "a tiny but fierce" ringleader of bullies. (Waugh, in his own autobiography, recalling Beaton, remarked coolly of his and his friends' treatment of Beaton: "Our persecution went no further than sticking pins into him and we were solidly beaten for doing so.") Beaton also noted that, when he ran into him later in life, Waugh had a knack for making even compliments sound suspicious. Beaton retells an anecdote heard from Lady Diana Cooper about Waugh one day giving quite precise instructions to a stranger who asked the whereabouts of a railway station. When Lady Diana afterwards remarked, "How clever of you to know where the station is," Waugh replied, "I don't. I always give people the wrong directions." Once, when he had behaved with particular rudeness to a young French intellectual at a dinner party in Paris at the home of Nancy Mitford, Miss Mitford, angry at his social brutality, asked him how he could behave so meanly and yet consider himself a believing and practicing Catholic. "You have no idea," Waugh returned, "how much nastier I would be if I was not a Catholic. Without supernatural aid I would hardly be a human being." Was he joking?

The more one learns about the life of Evelyn Waugh, the less one is inclined to think it a joke at all. In his biography, Christopher Sykes reports Waugh's strong aversion to Dylan Thomas, who used to appear from time to time at evenings at Cyril Connolly's house. Waugh asked Connolly, in fact, never to invite him when he knew that Dylan Thomas was to be there. The reason, as Sykes explains, is that in Thomas—who dressed in checked suits resembling Waugh's, whose language was like Waugh's made up of parody and fantasy, who like Waugh again was small and portly, and who like Waugh still again was often drunk (though Waugh was not, like Thomas, a boisterous drunk)—in Thomas Evelyn Waugh saw a caricature of himself. "He's exactly what I would have been," Waugh told Sykes, "if I had not become a Catholic."

There can be no greater impropriety than questioning the quality of another person's religious faith. As Evelyn Waugh himself wrote, "Every soul in his traffic with God has his own secrets." But in Waugh's case it happens that we do know the motives behind his conversion, in 1930 (at the age of twenty-seven), to Roman Catholicism, for the good reason that Waugh has described them in an essay entitled "Converted to Rome." In this essay he makes plain that he converted to Catholicism not because *"The Jesuits have got hold of him,"* or *"He is captivated by the ritual,"* or *"He wants to have his mind made up for him,"* but because he saw the present phase of European history as one in which "the essential issue" was "between Christianity and Chaos." In this issue he came down on the side of Christianity, and he chose Roman Catholicism because he thought Christianity more universal, better disciplined, and existing "in its most complete and vital form in the Roman Catholic Church." Waugh closed this essay

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by noting what was for him a crucial distinction in the churchgoing attitudes of Protestants and Catholics: "The Protestant attitude seems often to be, 'I am good; therefore I go to church,' while the Catholic's is, 'I am very far from good; therefore I go to church.'"

Such a document as this essay says less about how clearly Evelyn Waugh perceived God than about how vividly he felt the encroachments of chaos. What had his keen sense of chaos, what had his conversion to Catholicism, to do with his first wife's deserting him for another man in 1929 cannot be known with assurance, but certainly this event can only have contributed to both in no small way. Like so many of the characters in his novels, in his brief first marriage Evelyn Waugh had been a victim. How devastating this must have been to the young man of twenty-six who until now had strode through life without knowing serious setbacks: comfortably upper-middle class, adored by his parents, befriended by all whom he wished to befriend, gifted as both an artist and a writer, already celebrated as a dazzling comic novelist—only to end up as a dupe and a cuckold through the agency of a woman who now claimed to have married him without ever having loved him. He was shattered and humiliated. (Of Basil Seal, the character who in some respects functions as Waugh's alter-id, Waugh, in *Put Out More Flags,* writes: "He rejoiced, always, in the spectacle of women at a disadvantage.") After the breakup of his first marriage, some of Waugh's friends, according to Christopher Sykes, saw in him "a new hardness and bitterness and an utter disillusion which showed itself in cruelty."

The breakup of his marriage may also have confirmed Evelyn Waugh in his sense of his own unworthiness. Far from being self-infatuated, he was apparently always self-reproachful—friends with a penchant for psychologizing thought him self-hating—always the first to spot flaws in himself. Later in life, now long a Catholic, he chalked this up to a heightened sense of sin; hell, it was said, was his favorite Church dogma. Certainly he tended to feature his own vices. Waugh's diaries are filled with chronicles of his drinking and drugging (he took a drug called chloral for the insomnia that he suffered all his adult life). Reading his diaries one wonders when, between boozing bouts ("Monday 1 August 1955 . . . Uneatable dinner but plenty of champagne"), he was able to get any writing done. In fact, he turned out a great deal of work, scarcely ever missing a journalistic deadline, and needed his literary earnings to keep his large family afloat. But he preferred to emphasize, even if only to himself, how wicked he was. Recall, please, the line about the Catholic's attitude to churchgoing: "I am very far from good; therefore I go to church."

Evelyn Waugh was not the first connoisseur of chaos to sight his earliest specimens of chaos in the laboratory of his own heart. Having found chaos first by looking inward does not mean that chaos does not truly exist outwardly as well. One of the many hallucinations Gilbert Pinfold suffers is overhearing a voice say, "He doesn't really *believe* in his religion, you know. He just pretends to because he thinks it aristocratic. It goes with being Lord of the Manor." Cool and impersonal though Waugh makes his conversion to Catholicism sound, there is no reason to doubt its authenticity nor to doubt his religion's use to him as a barrier to the chaos he found both in his soul and in the world around him. It is also well to remember that, with the exception of his youthful book on Rossetti and *Decline and Fall* (1928), all of Evelyn Waugh's books were written while he was a Catholic. Waugh did not like being pigeon-holed as a Catholic writer; and it is not true to say of him, as he once said of J. F. Powers, that his whole art "is everywhere infused and directed by his Faith." Still, it can be said that a fierce sense of chaos looms over all that Evelyn Waugh wrote after his conversion. Not that he made the least pretense to being able to subdue the chaos that haunted him all his days; through his art, though,

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he was able to wrest a great deal of laughter from it.

As a Catholic Evelyn Waugh was very legalistic, even pedantic, knowledgable about minor points of doctrine and observant of all scraps of ritual. His Catholicism fit snugly into the formality of character he had created in his life. He early set himself up as a back number. He was very keen for old-world courtesy—for, that is, receiving it. (Giving it was something else.) He lived amid heavy Victorian furniture; he became something of a specialist in Victorian painting. He played the lord of the manor, all right, but, it must be added, he usually played it for laughs. He was the curmudgeonly little squire in the thick checkered suits who affixed before his house in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds a notice reading "No Admittance on Business." He refused to use the telephone. He called the day on which *The New Statesman* arrived "Black Friday"; he regularly read that journal as an act of self-provocation. When his hearing began to fail, he took to toting around an ear trumpet; he is usually described as "brandishing" this ear trumpet, which is not imprecise, for he used it as a social weapon to make other people uncomfortable. Once, at a dinner in his honor, when Malcolm Muggeridge rose to deliver a eulogy to him, Waugh, seated at a dais, deliberately set his ear trumpet away from him, to make clear to all in the room that nothing Muggeridge was about to say could possibly be worth hearing. He only gave this ear trumpet up when, at a dinner party given by his friend Ann Fleming, after using his trumpet to cause the maximum awkwardness all round, his hostess, having had all she could bear of his shenanigans, soundly thwacked the trumpet with a spoon while it was in his ear, causing, as Waugh later allowed, a sensation akin to that of having had a pistol fired in one's ear.

What lay behind this extraordinary act? Whimsy, for one thing, quite wild whimsy. But it was also very carefully calculated. Evelyn Waugh set out deliberately to outrage. Like his own Mr. Pinfold, he created "a front of pomposity mitigated by indiscretion." Spiritually and intellectually he was at odds with his age—and dressed and acted the part. (Interesting that George Orwell, the other writer of Waugh's generation who is greatly valued, also dressed and acted a part—that of a member of the working class.) Reviewing a book of contemporary etiquette, Waugh wrote: "The need now is for order." Reviewing a recently issued volume of the *Dictionary of National Biography,* he wrote: "This is not the age of reformation but of defence, when every man of goodwill should devote all his powers to preserving the few good things left to us from our grandfathers."

The pose of being perpetually outraged and the ploy of consistently outraging was for Evelyn Waugh a clever and useful gambit. Stripped down to his fundamental views, and devoid of his high gifts, Waugh might have seemed quite as drab and grumpy a figure as any other crotchety conservative gremlin. Outrageous though Waugh could be, he outraged with charm. He was never stupid, for, as Donat Gallagher, the editor of *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh* rightly says, his "flourishing extravagances always cling to a solid core of talent and intelligence."

In time people expected the outrageous from Evelyn Waugh, and he usually could be counted upon to deliver. As a young man, he played the radical to conservative friends and the conservative to radicals. Once he sensed which way the wind was blowing, he headed straight into it. Apart from his second wife and a few very close friends, no one knew quite how to take him. In his *Diaries* Chips Channon, recounting a lunch in London in 1934, notes:

> Also Evelyn Waugh, alias Mr. Wu. I never know . . . is he good trying to be wicked? Or just wicked trying to be nice? He looks like a ventriloquist's doll, with his shiny nose; I feel his ideals are measured by publishers' royalties. He told me today that he thought that anyone could write a novel given six weeks, pen, paper and no telephone or wife.

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Serving as a liaison officer in Yugoslavia in World War II, Waugh spread the rumor that Tito was a woman, a lesbian in fact, which supposedly got back to Tito. (Waugh was not precisely an ideal liaison officer, or officer of any kind; at one point he had to be removed from his command because it was feared that, in combat, his own men might shoot him.) He began a review of Randolph Churchill's book about a libel suit by writing: "No one who knows Mr. Randolph Churchill and wishes to express distaste for him should ever be at a loss for words which would be both opprobrious and apt." In the same review he makes the point that the journalists found guilty of libel are not sufficiently punished, for their wealthy newspapers pick up the costs when they are found guilty, so he concludes: "The time, I think, is ripe for the restoration of the pillory."

I believe I have established that Evelyn Waugh could be, as they used to note in folders in the personnel departments, "a difficult personality." Was he a snob into the bargain? Snobbery was of course part of his subject as a novelist. He was endlessly interested and amused by the intricacies of the English class system, which was beginning to come apart as he came to maturity. For him the joke was that no one seemed too lowly to look down upon someone else. In *A Handful of Dust,* Tony Last has gone off to a hotel in the countryside with a prostitute to establish his infidelity so that his wife can divorce him. At the hotel, as visitors come swinging through the doors of the dining room, Waugh writes: "'Yids,' explained Milly [the prostitute] superfluously. 'Still it's nice to get a change from the club once in a while.'" (The cruel art in that line of dialogue falls on the word "superfluously.") As for his own social tastes, "Evelyn," Frances Donaldson notes, "liked the smarter of the intellectuals, the more intellectual of the smart—and no one else." About the age of the common man, Waugh, a most uncommon man, had his qualms, and that is putting it very gently. When someone accused him of not caring for the Man in the Street, he replied that there was no Man in the Street—only men and streets. Upon publication of *Brideshead Revisited* he came in for heavy criticism not only for his often idealized treatment of that novel's aristocratic characters but for his rough portrayal of the young lower-middle-class character he called Lieutenant Hooper. Hooper is a man without the least shred of romanticism or interest in heroism, who accepts his induction into the army "like the measles," who is bereft of the least scintilla of culture, who has "an overmastering regard for efficiency" without the least aptitude for it, and who for Evelyn Waugh represents the grey crushing wave of the future. *Brideshead Revisited* was written while Waugh was on leave from the British Army in 1944. With the victory of the first Labour government in the general election after the War, for Waugh the Age of Hooper had arrived in earnest.

In a review of Edgar Johnson's biography of Charles Dickens, Waugh wrote: "Faults which would be excusable in other men become odious in the light of Dickens's writing." Something like the reverse applies to the life of Evelyn Waugh. Given the coolness of his art and the ferocity of his public mask, one is always surprised to discover him not acting perfectly monstrously. Of Gilbert Pinfold, he wrote: "He was not what is generally meant by the appellation a 'philanthropic' man; he totally lacked what was now called a 'social conscience.' But apart from his love of family and friends he had a certain basic kindliness to those who refrained from active annoyance." Waugh was a faithful husband; at home he played the Victorian paterfamilias, and none of his six children has ever written about him except in a kindly manner. To his small circle of close friends—Nancy Mitford, Diana Cooper, Ann Fleming, Christopher Sykes—he was a devoted if sometimes difficult (and socially dangerous) companion. Along with being modest about his own accomplishments, Waugh never displayed the least jealousy toward writers who were his contemporaries, and with the two among them who might have been considered his great-

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est rivals, Graham Greene and Anthony Powell, he never wrote nor spoke in other than an appreciative way. He came to the aid of a number of friends whom he found in illness or sore financial condition. And of course when he chose he could be utterly charming.

Studying the arc described by Evelyn Waugh's literary career, one discovers nearly at its middle an uncompleted novel entitled *Work Suspended*. Waugh began the book in 1939 and published it, in its incomplete form, in 1942. It is a brilliant piece of unfinished business, one fully worthy of a place in Max Beerbohm's museum. Waugh makes only two references to it in his *Diary*: one noting that, "I have rewritten the first chapter of the novel about six times and at last got it into tolerable shape"; the other, four years later, noting that Desmond MacCarthy was full of praise for it. What went wrong? Why, after only a hundred pages, did Waugh decide to throw in his pen?

One cannot know with any real precision, but in *Work Suspended* Waugh does offer a few clues. The novel's protagonist, who is a writer, comes into an inheritance that relieves him of the need to work for a few years, which causes him to remark that "it was a matter of pure athletics to go on doing something merely because one did it well." Does it seem pushing things to read into this sentiment Evelyn Waugh's own artistic boredom at continuing in the line of madcap comedy at which he was by now a pastmaster? The protagonist-narrator also remarks, about his father, who is the most splendidly comic of the many comic fathers in Waugh's work—he has strong views on the Jews being responsible for the vogue of French impressionist painting—that, "I had not then learned to appreciate the massive defences of what people call the 'border-line of sanity.'" I find this a haunting line, and one that puts one not only in mind of Waugh's own later bout of insanity (recounted in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*) but of what seems to me the most penetrating single sentence in all the criticism I have read of Waugh's work; it is a sentence written by V. S. Pritchett that reads: "His early books spring from the liberating notion that human beings are mad; the war trilogy [*Sword of Honor*], a work of maturity, draws on the meatier notion that the horrible thing about human beings is that they are sane."

World War II doubtless played a strong role in turning Evelyn Waugh away from his old sure-fire mode of comic creation. "The Great Bore War" he called it. His was the generation that came to maturity between the Wars. Virginia Woolf may have said that "human nature changed in 1910," but the Bright Young People who comprised Waugh's social set could still find spacious margins of leisure and luxury in which to gambol: lunches at the Savoy, bouts of giggly champagne drunkenness, a ready supply of servants to clean up the mess. But World War II put paid to that kind of life, and no one knew it better than Waugh. Long though he might for the old life, a man as unillusioned as he could scarcely convince himself it was any longer attainable. *Brideshead Revisited,* the first novel he completed after his failure with *Work Suspended,* is easily Evelyn Waugh's most nostalgia-laden book, and sings a threnody to a lavish style of life now quite dead.

After the War the comedy in Waugh's work is still there but now much subdued. Waugh's killing off Major Apthorpe in *Men at Arms,* the first of the novels in *Sword of Honor,* is strong evidence of this. Apthorpe, it will be recalled, is the extraordinary character who never travelled without his preposterous kit, which included a portable thunder-box, or water-closet, made by the firm of Connolly Chemical Closets. (Whimsical even in his depressions, Waugh loved to drag Cyril Connolly's name into his novels: the ridiculous British military figure in *Black Mischief* is General Connolly; Connolly is the name given to the monstrous children in *Put Out More Flags*; and a cruel portrait of Cyril Connolly himself under the name of Everard Spruce, the editor of a wartime journal entitled *Survival,* appears in the last novel of the trilogy, *Unconditional Sur-*

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render.) Perhaps Waugh killed off Apthorpe for fear that his marvelous comic blandness would take over his trilogy; at any rate, in the second volume of *Sword of Honor* he is replaced by Major Hound, a greatly less delightful figure who, as Waugh has another character note of him, "seems strangely lacking in the Death-Wish." *Sword of Honor* is not barren of comedy—"Guy, how are you?," asks a character of Guy Crouchback, the trilogy's rather drab hero. "Forty," he replies—but the comedy now has a certain edge that it didn't have in the past. Wavian comedy was always cool, and sometimes cruel, yet invariably it had a lovely gaiety about it; now it begins to take on a less attractive asperity. *Sword of Honor* is more ambitious, more mature, than the earlier of Waugh's novels. No one can accuse this work of not being in pursuit of the largest questions: what is honor, how to achieve personal salvation, is there a will to war propelled by an international death wish, are among the questions raised by the trilogy. Yet Evelyn Waugh in quest of the answers, even though his own earnestness is completely convincing, is now aesthetically less than satisfying.

Is it possible that Evelyn Waugh's was a naturally destructive talent? This sounds a degradation, a put-down, but it is not intended to be. The fact—I see it as a fact—is that Waugh was at his triumphant best on the attack. Think of the subjects that, in his early novels, he had taken on, and how absolutely on target he was in dealing with them—as those of us who have lived beyond his day have reason to know. In *Decline and Fall* he took on the joke of English education; in *Vile Bodies,* the emptiness of gossip-column high life; in *Scoop,* the inanity and insanity of modern journalism ("Look at it this way. News is what a chap who doesn't care much about anything wants to read. And it's only news until he's read it. After that it's dead."); in *Black Mischief,* what is now called the Third World (read today, that novel reads like V. S. Naipaul played for laughs); in *A Handful of Dust,* the toll exacted from family and tradition by attempting to live the smart life; in *Scott-King's Modern Europe,* the swindle of modern Communism in Europe. (Forgive me if I neglect *The Loved One,* my least favorite of Waugh's novels, because its target, the nuttiness of California funerary rites, seems to me too easy to knock off.) Evelyn Waugh did not really know how to write an unreadable novel; but these early novels of his, judged by their craftsmanship, their comic radiance, their intellectual brilliance, are quite without peer.

Writing about his friend Ronald Knox, Waugh noted: "The more learned and philosophic the man, the less likely he is to be 'contemporary,' for he will know that most 'new' ideas are restatements of very old ones and that the latest events are in all essentials repititions of what has happened before." This remark is not without its applications to Evelyn Waugh himself, who was both attracted to the contemporary and repelled by it. As an artist, he was very much a modernist: a master of irony, of decisive reticences, of abrupt juxtapositions of material that today seem cinematic yet derive from Ronald Firbank, whom Waugh acknowledged as one of his chief artistic influences. As a man, Waugh came more and more to hate modernity. But then so many modernist artists have come out against modernity. T. S. Eliot wrote, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust"; I believe Evelyn Waugh—who used part of that line for the title of one of his novels—truly saw the fear Eliot speaks about.

The hallucinating Gilbert Pinfold believes he overhears yet another disturbing conversation, in which one party asks another: "Were his books ever any good?" "Never *good.* His earliest ones weren't quite as bad as his latest. He's written out." Not only is this an hallucination; it's poor criticism into the bargain. But it was not half bad as prophesy. After *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957), Waugh produced only one more novel, *Unconditional Surrender* (1961). Still under the lash of having to earn a living for his large family, he continued to produce a

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goodly amount of very high-quality literary journalism. His last years seem to have been terribly unhappy ones. Plagued by insomnia, bothered as always by boredom, he attempted to fight off the first by stronger drugs, the second by retreating into an alcoholic haze. In a photograph of Evelyn Waugh taken in 1963—three years before his death by heart attack—among the members of an old group of friends from Oxford days known as the Railway Club, poor Waugh looks like a figure one might meet along the boulevards of hell: porcine, plastered, pathetically done in by life. In his last years he apparently felt his life was over, and wished it soon would be; an aphorism he composed around this time runs: "All fates are 'worse than death.'"

Apropos of Chesterton, a writer for whom he had qualified admiration, Waugh wrote:

> Humility is not a virtue propitious to the artist. It is often pride, emulation, avarice, malice—all the odious qualities—which drive a man to complete, elaborate, refine, destroy, renew, his work until he has made something that gratifies his pride and envy and greed. And in doing so he enriches the world more than the generous and good, though he may lose his own soul in the process. That is the paradox of artistic achievement.

It is a profound paradox, and one that is poignantly illustrated if in no way resolved in the life and career of Evelyn Waugh. All we know is that out of this gifted man's pain and terror has come a great deal of joy and laughter for his readers. It isn't much to know, but a lot for which to be grateful.

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The representational impulse: painting in New York 1960-1985

by Jed Perl

Representation is an impulse, not a style.
—Sidney Tillim

Looking back on the New York art scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s you see quite a few artists, mostly younger ones, painting landscapes, still lifes, figures. Diving into back issues of art journals from that time, you glimpse the loose coming together of these artists in studios, clubs, galleries. There were a number of group shows back then that brought representational painters—most of whom had already been showing in downtown galleries—onto the uptown scene. One of these shows was "Nine Realists," at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery in 1963. The twenty-first anniversary of that exhibition was recently celebrated at Schoelkopf with a then-and-now show featuring the nine artists who, in 1963, were mostly in their early thirties and just beginning to be known. It was called "Nine Realist Painters Revisited: 1963-1984."[1] Three of the artists—Leland Bell, Gabriel Laderman, and Louisa Matthiasdottir—have exhibited at Schoelkopf through the years; the other six, whose reputations range from small-scale to nationwide, were: Lennart Anderson, Harold Bruder, Audrey Flack, Paul Georges, Philip Pearlstein, and Sidney Tillim.

"Nine Realist Painters Revisited" wasn't a big show. The two paintings per artist—one from the 1960s and one recent—weren't necessarily the artists' best or most elaborate works, and for someone who didn't know the work very well the show may not have made much sense. It was a bit of a scrappy little affair, but there was also a rough rightness about it, which came in part from the emphasis on the early 1960s. One could see, at Schoelkopf, a variety of approaches to the world around us that reflected nicely the variety of representational painting that was being done at the time. The range of the original show led Hilton Kramer, in a 1964 review in *Arts Magazine,* to comment that the majority of the artists weren't realists. "Historically," he observed, realism "means Courbet—but after Courbet, what? . . . It can no longer be confidently assumed that the term refers to something specific." The title still doesn't fit, but in a funny way the lack of coherence gave the show a pleasant, unpolemical tone. "Nine Realist Painters Revisited" wasn't one of those dumb, glitzy Triumph of Realist Art exhibitons full of over-rendered house plants and coffee tables —it didn't offer us a slick, shopping-center-modern Vermeer. At Schoelkopf the paintings weren't just beaming out a message: you could get involved with them.

Schoelkopf's 1963 show was one among many such uptown debuts in those years; but it's not as if there had been no interest-

1 "Nine Realist Painters Revisited: 1963-1984" was on view at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery in New York from December 8, 1984 to January 2, 1985.

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ing representational painting done in New York in the preceding couple of decades. Tibor de Nagy had been showing realists—among them Fairfield Porter—since the early 1950s, and there had always been independents like Edwin Dickinson, John Graham, and Earl Kerkam, who pursued their quirky representational visions without regard for fashion. So it's not as if a movement suddenly sprang up in the early 1960s. And yet something about the painting of reality does seem to have started around then. When you try to summarize what that something is, it keeps eluding you—you're confronted by such a loose, divergent array of artists. Some were immersed in abstraction and came—at times with violent avowals—to representation; to others abstract painting never meant anything. All of them, though, seem to have felt themselves as a new force in American art, much as the pioneering American abstract artists had in the 1930s and 1940s. This new generation was not connected to the old realist line in America that ran from the Ash-can School to the Social Realists of the 1930s and was going to seed at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design. The young painters of still lifes, landscapes, and figures were, in their vision of the artist as a man who breaks through to new things, related to the world of the Abstract Expressionists, who had been, for some of them at least, teachers. They felt that what they were doing was timely. Clement Greenberg has recently denied ever saying to de Kooning that "You can't paint figuratively today." But even if the story—told by Porter—is apocryphal, the idea that for Porter the inevitability of abstraction was a challenge to be met by representational art seems emblematic of the spirit of the day. Alfred Russell—a marvelous painter who moved back and forth between abstraction and representation in those years—wrote around then: "Now is the time to paint the wrong pictures in the wrong century and the wrong place: paint Diana of Ephesus." There was a sense of moment.

When the Museum of Modern Art responded to the buildup of representational art in the 1950s with two shows—"New Images of Man" (1959) and "Recent Painting USA: The Figure" (1962)—the artists were angry. They knew that they were the ones who were putting things together and making the connections—and they were getting steamrolled. "New Images of Man" included a heterogeneous group of artists, some of whom the New York representational painters admired: there were Europeans such as Karel Appel, Francis Bacon, Dubuffet, and Giacometti, the Abstract Expressionists de Kooning and Pollock, and Californians Richard Diebenkorn and David Park. Porter, who was then reviewing for *The Nation,* wrote one of his angriest reviews. "The common superficial look of the exhibition is that it collects monsters of mutilation, death and decay." Porter didn't hate everything in the show, but he hated the mindset that had gone into organizing it. "The violent image of man has the purpose of making a creation acceptable to critics, it gives an easy subject matter to critical writing, for those paintings and sculptures seem to mean something profound in proportion to the amount of distortion and violence of their appearance." Three years later, when seventy-four Americans were selected from a pool of nearly two thousand applicants for "Recent Painting USA: The Figure," the show turned out to be another mostly monster anthology. Philip Pearlstein has recalled that "Everyone referred to ["Recent Painting USA"] as the 'Buchenwald show.'" Porter must have felt that he'd said his piece about the figure-as-monster. His review opened with the laconic observation that "some painters have never stopped painting the figure, and since the exhibit shows no change on the part of particular painters from a non-objective to a figurative style, it could be said to represent a renewed interest in the figure on the part of critics and the audience rather than among painters." Most of Porter's review was devoted to a general discussion of figure painting in the Western tradition. At the end he praised two painters in the show—Richard Lindner and

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Elaine de Kooning—and regretted the absence of Alex Katz and Paul Georges. Georges, incidentally, was in Schoelkopf's "Nine Realists" show. And both Georges and Katz were included in an exhibit called "The Figure" that the Kornblee Gallery organized as a response to "Recent Painting USA."

Two other painters in "Nine Realists"—Tillim, who was at the time writing regularly for *Arts Magazine*, and Pearlstein—went into print to protest the MOMA show. In a review with the fetching title "Waiting for Giotto," Tillim observed that the monster images recalled social realism in the way "the message obscures or distorts plastic structure and organization . . . . So much moral stress is given to the new Figure (and the fact that the Figure is simply there), its anatomy as threadbare as a depression sharecropper or bloated by the excess of repressed violence, that we get very little of what we currently understand as a consistent painting." And Pearlstein in an article in *Art News*—it also had a rousing title: "Figure Paintings Today Are Not Made In Heaven"—complained that "a moralistic ban has been placed on spatial illusion. But it is an arbitrary ban. The flatness of the picture plane is no more a truth than was the flatness of the world before Columbus." It might seem madness, Pearlstein said, but it is still possible for a painter "educated in the 20th century modes of picture-making to take as his subject the human figure, conceived as a self-contained entity possessed of its own dignity, existing in an inhabitable space, viewed from a single vantage point."

Pearlstein's article probably came closer than anything written at the time to defining what separated the work appearing in shows like Schoelkopf's "Nine Realists" and Kornblee's "The Figure" from the pictures at MOMA: the artists at MOMA were using the figure, to quote Tillim, as an "apocalyptic" emblem. What was missing was the very thing the artists at Schoelkopf and elsewhere were so absorbed in: a belief that the coherence of nature could inspire a new kind of pictorial coherence. By giving oneself over to the integrity of nature, the artist could discover a new aesthetic integrity. "The artist working from a model," Pearlstein wrote, "is guided by his particular interests to concentrate on the forms, or on their spatial relationships, or on light or color. These interests tend to be mutually exclusive. The space interests of Charles Cajori [a painter in the Matisse tradition], for example, are in no way related to the light and color interests of Paul Georges or Fairfield Porter. The paintings transcend mere description when these interests are intensely pursued. The paintings become explorations conducted in the full knowledge of the complex esthetic we have inherited."

"Figure Paintings Today Are Not Made In Heaven" is an artist's article—it comes straight out of the studio—and it conveys what a lot of artists were feeling at the time. They were all fired up over perception and the paintings that could be made out of perception. Pearlstein's description of the process of making a representational painting leaves the possibilities fairly open. Though he may not have quite intended it, his description could as much describe Cubism as classic modeled form. You felt that variety at Schoelkopf, and that's what was good about the show. For if Laderman's *View of Florence* (1962-63) has a certain flavor of Quattrocento—or nineteenth-century—completeness, Bell's and Matthiasdottir's self-portraits suggest a relationship to nature that was hardly possible before 1890.

So what starts in the late 1950s and early 1960s—in the sessions of drawing from the model and the still life, in the visits to Corot and Velázquez and Poussin at the Metropolitan—is a new absorption in the relation between what is seen and felt in nature and what of that can be put on the canvas. The artists form not so much one group or movement but a loose commingling—a frieze of artists: individuals interrelated but in no fixed way, each on his or her own evolution. It's a crowded scene. There are loud, factious meetings of the Figurative Alliance on the lower East Side; there are paintings, galleries, rising and falling stars,

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and articles and reviews in newspapers and magazines.

Most of the representational painting of the 1950s and early 1960s was affected in one way or another by the presence of Abstract Expressionism. Sometimes representation was a reaction against it, but this was not always the case. The new American painting had fired a reconsideration of Impressionism—especially the later work of Monet—which was suddenly seen as confirming the essentially improvisatory, rebellious nature of Abstract Expressionist structure. And many of the artists who turned to nature in the 1950s wanted to get loose before nature in much the way Abstract Expressionists let loose before the canvas. Porter is the most important figure in this group of painters. His best work stays close to the free-floating experience of nature, and some of his most interesting critical statements point at an essentially anti-structural, mysterious approach to nature and art. (Porter's dislike of Mondrian, who improvised within a set structure, makes perfect sense when seen in this light.) In his criticism Porter sometimes blurs the line between art and reality, between abstraction and representation—in this he is rather de Kooning-ish. One of the last statements Porter published, in the catalogue of his 1974 exhibition, is a resounding rejection of programmatic thinking in art. "So far as it has merit, a painting is a fact, arbitrary and individual."

This line of thought was echoed in the introduction to a show at the Ingber Gallery in 1975 called "Painterly Representation." It included sixteen loose representational painters, among them Bell, Georges, Matthiasdottir, Porter, and Louis Finkelstein, who also organized the exhibition. In his introduction to the catalogue Finkelstein defined painterly vision as an approach in which "everything is up for grabs: the style, the space, the structure, the attitude, all affect, the way we are touched by the world." The definition of representation as improvisation could apply to Porter and Finkelstein—who has painted some beautiful views of the freeways and fairgrounds of Queens—and a number of other painters in "Painterly Representation." It doesn't, though, tell us anything much about the painterly painters at Schoelkopf. This is because the painters in "Nine Realists"—both the painterly ones and the more detailed ones, like Pearlstein and Laderman—were rejecting improvisation. They were fed up with painting that was led on by experience; they yearned for a sense of limits. Laderman and Pearlstein recall, in their hunger for detail, the empiricism of Corot and Courbet. Lennart Anderson's clear outlines and fading-away color echo the neoclassical antiquarianism of Puvis de Chavannes. And Bell, Georges, and Matthiasdottir recall the attitude of the post-Impressionists, who used modern techniques but were uneasy with the uncomposed compositions of their Impressionist mentors. It's the yearning for order that links all the painters at Schoelkopf; they're all after an experience of the world that can be reconciled with the coherence of traditional painting.

Artists sometimes resent it when their work is referred to as painterly. They see the term, with some justification, as a label that turns paintings into products. But they are reacting, I believe, to the most limited meaning of the term, in which painterly suggests a way of handling paint. Painterly can describe much more: a way of inventing and realizing pictures based on the evocation of forms rather than the strict construction of forms.

Modern painterly painting began with Manet, who has become, at least since his 1983 retrospective, the darling of the postmoderns. Postmoderns see in Manet the King of Deconstruction and Appropriation, ripping off the museums and turning tradition into a slapdash painterly cartoon. Their accounts at times jibe with elements in Manet, and it is surely the irreverence with which Manet can approach the past that has made many current painterly representational artists shy away from him a bit. If I am right, painterly painters in New York have never quite viewed Manet with the enthusiasm shown by Picasso, Matisse, Derain, and

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a more recent French painter such as Jean Hélion. For the French, who have never doubted their grip on tradition, Manet's ambivalence toward the past and what may have been his nose thumbing (you can never be sure with Manet) was *the* liberating example. Americans aren't so fast to snipe at tradition, since they don't have such a strong hold on it. So while painterly was for France a way of suggesting through the flash of brushstrokes the breakup of the past in the face of the present, for many American artists painterly is a way of confirming the usableness of the past through dashing, brushy evocations of old styles. This attitude informs the work of a painterly abstractionist like de Kooning as much as it does any realist's work. For American artists, painterly representation is a way of paying double homage: to the experience of the present and the meaning of the art of the past. Something like this double act operates in the work of Georges, Matthiasdottir, and Bell.

Paul Georges, the only one of the painterly artists at Schoelkopf who crops up much in Porter's criticism, seems almost dazed by the way he sees art everywhere he looks. He's one of those artists who wears his love of the past on his sleeve, and he seems to like the old ideas so much that they keep him from developing some ideas of his own. When, as in *Paulette* (1981), Georges paints a glass goblet, a pear, or a girl's skin, you feel that he isn't really thinking about anything that he's seen so much as he's caught up in a fantasy that he's Titian or Tiepolo painting these things. I remember a show of Georges's work at the Blue Mountain Gallery sometime in the 1970s in which —though the paintings seemed to slip out of your grasp—there was a likeable freshness about it all. I imagine that is what pleased Porter in Georges's work. There is hardly a Georges painting, though, that doesn't seem compromised by a fatal flaw in his taste which draws him, inexorably, toward the illustrative. He can get caught up in small details like the glints on the glass in *Paulette* that—though he obviously insists on them because they're like details in classical paintings—throw the whole structure awry. Or he will grab onto some large, Old Masterish compositional conceit that is so far outside his direct experience that he can't make it real for us. Georges's paintings have a brazen look and a comic attitude toward the art of the past that sometimes makes me think of Manet. Certainly, Georges is the most Manet-ish of current painterly representational artists, and my own discomfort with his painting may have something to do with my problems with Manet. But even if one is completely convinced by Manet, his near-parody would seem to be different from Georges's near-parody of a near-parody.

Manet was drunk on the capacity of sheer paint to evoke life. He uses the seductive qualities of paint, but sometimes the effects aren't convincing—it just looks painty—and one feels that the physicality of the materials has gotten the better of him. There are moments in Louisa Matthiasdottir's work—in the more virtuosic passages of glass objects in the still lifes, or in her occasional flower pieces—when she seems to recall Manet's giddiness over the evocative powers of the brushstroke, but Matthiasdottir never uses the brush to rip things up in the Manet manner. For Matthiasdottir, the bigness of the brush is less a way of letting loose than a way of simplifying the tradition—of getting at essences. The modernness of Matthiasdottir's painterly stroke is not in its freedom but in its synoptic concision. Though her painting carries along all the traditional baggage of subject matter, naturalistic atmosphere, and structural coherence, Matthiasdottir is very radical in the way she assigns value to these old verities. Often it seems that Matthiasdottir needs her mundane, traditional subjects so that there is something against which to measure the full effect of her painterly vocabulary of clean forms and high, singing color: the treatment doesn't just support the subject, it poses a challenge. Matthiasdottir's paintings present a tradition in the process of opening up and growing beyond itself into something new. She takes the old equations and ab-

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stracts them, multiplying implications to such a degree that the specific begins to point, in a very modern way, toward the archetypal and the infinite.

Matthiasdottir has a show at Schoelkopf every two years, and so it's been possible to watch her go step by step through what has been one of the most impressive evolutions in recent art. Her painterly representation began as almost insistently naturalistic—as a style that meant to evoke no style. In the first works that were reproduced much in New York (in the early 1960s: they were mostly portraits) Matthiasdottir displayed a firmness and a directness—a way of locking into the big volumes of a face and a head—that remains a glory of her art. There's an impressive scale to her brushstrokes, and she always knows how to use those broad, flat strokes of paint to convince us of the reality of anything she's looking at. Up until recently I'd say her most exciting paintings were her still lifes. She was completely comfortable with the combination of bourgeois domesticity and formal composition; but something about the centrality within the Western tradition of made-up landscape and figure composition seemed, in the early 1970s, to be beckoning to her. At that time she began to exhibit big, imagined compositions—and it felt like a step into the unknown. Matthiasdottir had always been sure of nature; now she wanted to make paintings whose logic came from outside of nature. Matthiasdottir wanted something more planned; she wanted to take upon herself the art of the past and let it become a second skin.

In the early 1970s compositions, based on recollections of her youth in Iceland (some seemed to grow out of old snapshots), Matthiasdottir was obviously building on her experience of working from life (she'd always done landscapes). These big new compositions had a rare largeness of ambition—there was a whole world in them—but they didn't electrify the viewer the way the still lifes did. It was as if Matthiasdottir had resolved to embrace figure composition as a conceptual activity, related to classicism in its detachment from experience. Matthiasdottir's painting process here was the reverse of Manet's. She was evoking tradition not in order to break it up and herald the triumph of the modern, but in order to see the present through the clarifying glass of the past. In a series of works from the mid-1970s based on a lake shore in Maine, Matthiasdottir threw herself into a Seuratesque study of classical landscape space, arranging the repoussoirs of trees and the silhouettes of close-up standing or reclining figures against a progress of space into distances of alternating dark and light bands. In another series from that time she concentrated on large, sharply silhouetted farm animals—a cow, a horse. Both groups of paintings had a density of color and shape—an abstract force—uncommon in her work up to that time. But these figure compositions shown in the mid-1970s seemed a bit overdetermined, as if the abstracting impulse were endangering that sense of life—of the volumes of things in nature—that had always come so easily to her.

At the end of the 1970s, the perceptual and conceptual strains in Matthiasdottir's work cross-fertilized; she was suddenly buoyed up by history, as if her modern sensibility had been underlined by the echo chamber of tradition. The still lifes continued her old study of the bourgeois formalism of Chardin, but with a new and almost supernatural clarity of form—an original notion of the abstract value of two-dimensional conflations of three-dimensional objects. The figure compositions, especially the extraordinary views of Icelandic cities, had that sense of abstract form, but it was now animated in some rare way by the accidental and provisional. One wall of Matthiasdottir's 1980 show, where the long, horizontal, brilliantly colored *Vesturgata* cityscape hung next to the big, pale, all grey-and-beige *Self-Portrait with Umbrella,* holds especially clearly in the mind: these paintings threw together the disordered felicities of the world and the ordering process of art to create dazzling metaphors of freedom within constraint. From Matthiasdottir I

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now expect nothing short of miracles. Particularly stirring from the past few years is a large self-portrait in a striped sweater, in which the artist has her hands on her hips. The form of the figure—tight at the head, bowing out in the middle—is a conception worthy of Velázquez. And the new painting in "Nine Realist Painters Revisited," of a horse and rider, is also remarkable: this single, massive volume takes hold of the picture space in much the way Renaissance equestrian monuments take hold of city squares.

Leland Bell is another artist who has gathered strength from a sense of connection to the great central line of European art: the line that runs from Titian to the seventeenth century in Holland and Spain and then on to France and straight into modern easel painting—both figurative and abstract. In an article Bell wrote about Jean Hélion in 1964, he recalled that "In 1940 [when Bell was eighteen] I had a passion for abstract art: at that time it appeared to me as the only true and possible path. I used to haunt the Gallatin Collection in Washington Square. My enthusiasms were Arp, Mondrian, Gris, Léger and Klee (though not particularly the Klees in that collection). I remember going day after day to stare at a favorite Arp *papier collé*." Bell's article, with its moving description of Hélion's evolution from abstraction (for which Hélion was an ardent polemicist) to representation, suggests how significant Hélion was for him. Bell, like Hélion, has been preoccupied with an idea of figure composition borne of a post-abstract revaluation of traditional Western painting. Bell isn't re-imagining the space of nature as Finkelstein's painterly realists are; he's re-imagining the space of art. Bell's work over the past two decades consists of a limited group of motifs which he has returned to again and again: self-portraits; a motif of several figures behind a table gesturing at a butterfly or moth; and a motif of a bedroom with a man, a woman, a cat, and a bird. The fine, recent Bell painting at Schoelkopf, *Two Nudes with Cat* (1982-83), treated the bedroom motif on the biggish scale (roughly four feet wide by six feet high) he has been employing with increasing success in the last decade. (These days it sometimes seems that bigger is better with Bell.) Bell uses a relatively limited range of colors: warm terracottas, pale bisques, striking, yellowed or purpled blues. The bodies are colored in a few tones: on the figure of the standing woman, gesticulating wildly at the cat, a single red runs along her back contour, all the way from foot to neck. In turn, the few spreading tones are held in by black lines—a Bell signature—which announce, like great unfurlings of ribbon, the edges of the forms. The Bell figure compositions are thus, in some respects, reminiscent of the moderns he looked at in the Gallatin Collection: Arp, in their flow of forms; Mondrian, and a certain kind of Léger, in their reductive sensibility.

I once heard a painter complain of Bell's recent figures that the simplification of the forms could not support the complexity of movement and anatomy that the contours seemed to imply. And although I don't agree, I think he put his finger on the very odd flavor of the recent Bells. Bell has at times, and especially in his self-portraits, gone all the way into the little bumps and curves of human form; but in the last few years he's been paring things down. Given the black outlines and flat color shapes of Bell's figures, you might think they were related to Léger's later figures. The Légers, though, read as static in a Byzantine sort of way, and the colors propel us over, around, and through the figures, rather than letting us sense the movement within them. In *Two Nudes with Cat* the movement isn't around the figures, it's in the figures. As you look at the simplified, clear yet telegraphic quality of the forms, you feel the pressing into space—the tension and release—that is implied in a tightened muscle, a raised arm. Bell is a Mondrianist in the sense that he thinks it's all in the relationships; with *Two Nudes with Cat* you don't fix on an arm or a torso, but on an arm *against* a torso, a leg *against* a bed sheet. Out of this process of balancing one element against

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another, you begin to grasp the coming-into-being of a world. That Bell should use such abstract means to convince us of the reality of his figures is one of the surprises of his art. But perhaps a strategy this radical was needed, given the largeness of Bell's dream, which is to reinstate the idea of human movement in painting, lost, perhaps since Rubens—certainly since Delacroix.

In his introduction to the catalogue of the 1975 "Painterly Representation" show, Finkelstein observed that there were too many theories to describe the new realism: "too much false, flatulent, weak theory . . . theory which stands in front of the work or which props up what would otherwise be too weak to be of interest." This is definitely true; and yet, amidst the bad theory, some very beautiful thought has come out of the studios and classrooms of representational painters—about art in general as much as about the art of still life and landscape and figure painting. This art, which has involved a large-scale reconsideration of modernist art and its mythology, has given birth to a number of remarkable talkers and teachers.

Bell, who made it his business in the 1950s to get to know the great figures of postwar French representational art at first-hand, gained through his contact with Balthus, Giacometti, and Hélion a special appreciation of non-abstract European art since 1920. (Most representational artists in New York—like most abstractionists—thought that European art had pretty much collapsed before World War II.) I remember Bell, in 1971, lecturing at the New York Studio School—an important art school founded by the painter Mercedes Matter—on the later work of de Chirico, Dufy, and Picasso. I don't think there were many people back then raving about these things; there are more now. It is, I would guess, in large measure Finkelstein and Laderman who have made the graduate program in painting, at Queens College, where they teach, one of the finest in the country. And Tillim, who teaches at Bennington, has an astonishing catholicity of taste. I once saw him take part in a critique of painting majors at an art school, and the way he could pass through student versions of Neo-Expressionism, Color-field abstraction, straight portraiture, and traditional abstraction and bring to each the same largeness of vision was dazzling. Tillim may have it somewhere inside himself to write a great book of aphorisms and *pensées*. He can come up with unforgettable observations, such as this, from an essay on Walker Evans: "As there are no primitives among photographers, since the camera does the drawing, there can be no grand style in photography, since the camera cannot generalize." Nothing I've read on photography in Walter Benjamin or Roland Barthes goes deeper.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Laderman and Tillim wrote a series of articles for *Artforum* which, when read together, suggest an effort to find a safe and honorable place for representational art within the go-go atmosphere of late-1960s New York. (Scandalously, there is no trace of Tillim—who was a contributing editor to *Artforum*—in the recent anthology of articles from the magazine.[2]) In the late 1960s Tillim was already painting figure compositions and Laderman was working on precisely rendered landscapes and still lifes. Although their articles in *Artforum* never quite have the wild, heady ease with ideas that sometimes gets into their stand-up remarks, they do have a weird, crabbed brilliance. I feel in the writing a quality almost of desperation.

Laderman and Tillim, like many of the artists who had been painting representationally since the beginning of the 1960s and earlier, were horrified at the way their art and the art of their friends was being associated with Pop Art. Or was being seen as a post-Pop realism; Pop Art gone normal. Tillim was trying to convince people that representation wasn't just a joke on mass culture. He wanted people to see it as a new response to the crisis of modern art that

2 *Looking Critically: 21 Years of Artforum Magazine*, edited by Amy Baker Sandback; UMI Research Press, 342 pages, $29.95.

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Greenberg had described as the crisis of the easel painting. Tillim was interested in the huge dimensions of some 1960s paintings —Al Held's abstract *Greek Garden* (fifty-six feet wide) and James Rosenquist's Pop *F-111* (eighty-six feet wide) are two that he mentioned more than once. (*F-111,* which no one talks about now, was shown at the Metropolitan and occasioned on interview with the artist in *Partisan Review.*) The sizes of these works struck Tillim as an effort to give a new monumentality—and perhaps a new cultural importance—to modern painting. Their failure convinced Tillim that modernist painting, with its emptying out of space and generalizing of forms, could simply not support a monumental art. The figure, Tillim believed, must be the carrier of monumentality. And, as well, in the late 1960s, at a time when Civil Rights and Vietnam were making a lot of artists feel that they needed a way to respond, Tillim saw representation as a source of renewal. "There is a nostalgia about the new figurative art that, far from being reactionary, expresses a desire to reclaim lost ideals in life and lost quality in art. It seems to me that the essential idealism at stake in civil rights, where it is not corrupted by power or destroyed by reaction, confirms a longing somewhere in the Western imagination for a 'new order.'" Laderman wrote something similar in a 1970 article, "Notes from the Underground": "A radical political artist must be a figurative artist."

In the late 1960s, Tillim was longing for a true history painting—something that did not yet exist. In the summer of 1969 he wrote of *The Killing of Frank O'Hara* that "Alfred Leslie has attempted a very large 'history painting,' an extremely problematical work which, at the time this paper was written, was still unfinished." Tillim's own development as a painter—represented at Schoelkopf by an oddly cropped still life of *Shoes and Socks* from 1962—had by 1970 moved into figure composition. Between 1970 and 1975 his painting evolved from compositions that he perhaps felt related to Mannerism, to a sense of structure and scale increasingly neoclassical, which he combined with subjects derived from early American history and the Old Testament. These paintings never got over an embarrassing awkwardness—they're failed in realization if not in spirit—and there was a visible relief in Tillim's show at Meredith Long Contemporary in 1979, when he embraced a wildly angled figuration in which men and women out of modern life and myth were caught in semi-abstract structures reminiscent of Jacques Villon and the German Expressionists. The best of these pictures—*Murder Hollywood Style, Self-Portrait*—had a harum-scarum, improvised feeling that left the viewer happy. There was no system, and the kalaidoscopic running together of life and art seemed to come from deep inside.

Tillim may have bailed out—he's now painting abstractly—but the monumental figure composition that he was dreaming of in the early 1970s has, in a sort of form, come to pass, especially at the Frumkin Gallery. This is where Jack Beal and Alfred Leslie show—they are contemporaries of the Schoelkopf painters, though they started painting representationally a bit later—along with a painter of monumental still lifes, James Valerio. These artists can exhaust you with their craftsmanship: looking at their vast, multi-figure compositions one can't help thinking of the hours of rendering that went into them. There's something hard and calculated here that recalls middle-level Baroque painting. The subjects (modern America) and treatments (dark-toned, dramatically lit) come from an impersonal, central depository and the sizes seem calculated, like the sizes of really gory Italian altarpieces, to bludgeon the viewer into submission. Beal, Leslie, and Valerio are picking up on everything that is dubious in the grand tradition—they resurrect the plodder's middle ground of Western art. It's morning-after painting, hung over with great ideas the way dutiful Baroque artists were hung over with the Renaissance. All the joy is missing, and you leave the gallery wondering if the museums

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weren't already full up with Caravaggisti.

The scale and the brassy, high-relief effects in the work of Beal and Leslie strike me as an attempt to compete in some way with the essentially extrovert character of abstract art, which rises out of the picture space to embrace the viewer. (Leslie's figurative painting recalls his earlier Abstract Expressionist work in its insistent frontality.) The deep space of representational art can give a feeling of melancholy to viewers used to the up-frontness of abstraction, because representation—although in some sense more available than abstraction—always withdraws into a fictive space: it's a mirror of reality. The essential burden of representation in a post-abstract world is to persuade us that the flight away from the surface—the flight into fiction—isn't neurotic escapism. All the moral imperatives invoked in the name of representation—about regaining some lost universe of values, etc.—won't necessarily help the artist convince the viewer that a world receding from view is worth looking into. But if not the flight into space, then what? Matthiasdottir's and Bell's painting suggest that it is possible to be inside the picture space and in front of it simultaneously—a modernist solution. One can also create a paper-thin world of illusion that exists just at the surface: you don't recede, but you don't come forward, either. This sad fragility of things, pressed as if in an album for safekeeping, is what lies at the heart of Lennart Anderson's work and gives it a smooth, lost-world charm.

Anderson was represented at Schoelkopf neither at his best—which is in some of his landscapes, though not the one here—nor at his most ambitious, which is in his beautifully painted pastoral compositions. These large works, the result of years of meditation (they have sometimes been shown and reproduced in unfinished states) seem contemporary in a distanced way. The landscape might be the northeastern United States, and the figures—misted dancers and lovers and musicians—might be at a 1960s Be-in. They're sleepy and dreamy and they invoke a tradition that I, frankly, don't find all that sympathetic: the tradition of Puvis de Chavannes and the earlier Degas, with its finely drawn outlines and delicately colored-in spaces. (Picasso was right to claim that Degas was best in the loosely improvised monotypes.) The beauty of the work lies in its faint-breathed loveliness. Anderson's not a shouter; his pastorals are serene, but the serenity feels a bit like low-level depression—an inability to act that mirrors the refusal to break open the picture space.

Anderson has earned a special place in the hearts of younger painters with a vision of the classical European past that is sweetly melancholy and answers the craving so many feel to witness the crumbly twilight days of a tradition. I once knew two painters who got stoned and imagined they were Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci—and that strikes me as an especially American anecdote, because it suggests a wistfulness like the nineteenth-century painter Washington Allston's in his later Boston days, when he was working hopelessly at *Belshazzar's Feast,* the huge figure composition he could never finish. American art has up until recently stood outside the mainstream of European tradition: the best nineteenth-century American painting grows not from the central pictorial concerns of Europe but from extra-pictorial obsessions with reality or its mystical opposite. This is why Impressionism, which was the result of the *pictorial* revolution in nineteenth-century realism, never developed organically in America.

Recent representational painting—like abstraction since the 1930s—reflects a cosmopolitan culture that is less tied to the old America, and Anderson is, in his representational way, crying over the European culture he feels is now almost within his grasp in much the way Guston must have been in his best abstractions of the 1950s. Porter, Bell, and Matthiasdottir, each in his own way, exhibit a more vigorous, direct, and untroubled relation to the European past. For other realists, though, it has been important to feel the distance from European modernism as a positive thing. Part of

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what Laderman and Tillim were trying to do in their *Artforum* pieces was to set the stage for a New World representation that was ignited by the feeling of the place, which must have seemed to them so un-European. (Tillim was very definite, at one point, on using American subjects—George Washington, John Adams.) Hopper had already done something along these lines, but his achievement, though great, was idiosyncratic—you couldn't build on it. For Pearlstein and Laderman, representation came to have a special meaning. It was an indigenous American value. They're the only two of the highly detailed representational painters who have seen that high illusionism, in the wake of modernism, must be a poetic choice, vindicated in the realm of metaphor. For Pearlstein and Laderman illusion isn't an act of imitation but an act of art. They glory in each detail as if it were the key to some esoteric, aesthetic knowledge.

With the possible exception of Porter (whose national, as opposed to local, fame was really posthumous), Pearlstein is the only representational painter of quality who has achieved a major reputation. I find something admirable—and Morandi-ish—in the way Pearlstein has continued to look for drama in the most ordinary and unexceptional encounters of the artists' studio. When he's gone out to look at the great ruins of the world, it has seemed like the same search continued through other channels. Over two decades, his paintings haven't changed, just gotten better. He's become a deeper artist because he's lived out the contradictions in his view, painting not from program but from feeling. Although his 1962 article "Figure Paintings Today Are Not Made In Heaven" included a plea for deep space and against the roving eye, Pearlstein's modern eyes have roved and the space has always refused to go back much, except in spots. The 1962 *Two Nudes* at Schoelkopf was interesting in this context, because (if I read it correctly) one could see that the floor plane, which had originally been rendered with floor boards rushing off to the left at a steep angle, had been repainted as a unified field. I expect that Pearlstein found the floor too spatial, and painted out the boards to bring the whole thing up to the surface. The truth is that Pearlstein's paintings are nothing much as structure: they're triumphs of sensibility. (In this sense they recall Abstract Expressionism.) Pearlstein's pictures have nothing to do with the classical idea of a self-contained image: they force you to see through his eyes—an eye that's nuts over bumps and surface textures and patterns and shadows. Pearlstein's recent paintings strike me as having some of that surprising, Caravaggesque spatial ambiguity that the abstract painter Frank Stella has been talking about recently but hasn't really managed to incorporate into his own work. Pearlstein's last show at Frumkin, in 1982, and his recent show at Hirschl & Adler Modern, in which the studio props of chairs and mirrors and the patterns of checked linoleum, rugs, and clothes seemed to be overtaking the models, contained his most exciting pictures to date. They have a hard-edged yet discombobulated air that reveals the delight with detail as an abstract value that you feel in some of the early work of Joan Miró.

Gabriel Laderman's revelation about space came at just about the time Pearlstein was working on "Figure Paintings Today Are Not Made In Heaven." In 1962 Laderman was, as he recalled in a later article for *Artforum,* in Italy, "where, contrary to my expectations, such paintings as the Signorelli Chapel in the Orvieto Cathedral or the Mantegna Camera degli Sposi at Mantua, rather than questioning the reality of the space in which the viewer stood, had self-contained, believable spatial and illusionistic reference points constructed by the artist." The fruit of this revelation, which was shown in "Nine Realists" and "Nine Realist Painters Revisited," was the 1962-63 *View of Florence.* It's a big, somber picture, and has some of the quiet drama of the foreigner's contemplation of the heartland of European art that we know from nineteenth-century paintings of Italy. No other painting from the early 1960s at Schoelkopf exemplified so thor-

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ough an embrace of classical spatial development, and yet one of the interesting things about *View of Florence* is the degree to which its pictorial drama (as opposed to its spatial logic) has to do with two-dimensional composition. What really catches the viewer up in *View of Florence* is not so much the spatial regress as the little compositions of counterposed rectangles—rhythms of opened and closed shutters, of walls, roof lines, and window frames—that you discover within that overall development of space. The evolution of Laderman's landscapes since the 1960s has involved an attempt to place the pictorial drama within the spatial development. He manages this most fully in the landscapes done in the Malaysian city of Kuala Lumpur in the mid-1970s. Here, in a land of onion-dome architecture and banal modern office buildings, you have the odd jumps of space and scale that inform the *View of Florence,* but realized within a fuller plasticity. These Kuala Lumpur roofscapes are as clear and as fluid as Canalettos—and yet they're empty, unpeopled, and have a poetry that is completely of the twentieth century. The Kuala Lumpur paintings are Canaletto redone after de Chirico—and they leave you with a chill.

Laderman has not had a show since 1977, but the few recent paintings I have seen suggest that his work has now taken a fascinating turn. A recent still life shown at Schoelkopf last fall was the most complex he has ever done. This painting reminds me of Tillim's comment about Laderman (in an article in *Artforum* in 1968), that he has "a mannerist feeling for space but a classical feeling for volume." After years of exemplifying a taste for cleaned-up, spiffy spaces, Laderman is getting into the poetics of mess. The most exciting of the few new Laderman paintings I've seen is a three-part series called *Murder and its Consequences,* the middle panel of which was shown in "Nine Realist Painters Revisited." Laderman has done figures before—but nothing like this. The paintings are not especially large—roughly three by four feet—and the drama they relate is chamber-sized. The compositions turn dramatically away from the viewer, either through the conceit of a foreground figure with its back to us, or through a precipitate perspective. The flight from the surface becomes a shrieking metaphor. The surfaces are extremely broken: big forms, wrenched into odd, disturbing angles, are cut through by shadows and the irregularities of complex shapes and patterns. It's a claustrophobic urban world of boredom and hysteria and it reminded me, immediately, of the Martin Scorsese movie *Taxi Driver.* Everything's bombed out and the lives are like nightmare mutations.

In the first of the three panels (which is vertical) we are in an ill-furnished room with the thick, bland moldings of old West Side New York apartments. There are two figures. A young, attractive woman sits naked, head down on a miserable unmade cot. She is dominated—and the painting is dominated—by the figure of a young man who stands in the foreground with his back to us gesticulating at her: it's definitely a lovers' quarrel. In the second painting (which, like the third, is horizontal) we're brought close to the bed. Now the woman is lying on it, and the man sits on the edge, again with his back to us, in such a way that from where we are he seems to split her in half. To the right we see her legs, visually severed from the rest of her, so that the open space between her pelvis and her feet, which are touching, describes a strange, vaginal shape. To his left we see her head, flung back on the pillows with his right hand firmly around her neck; he's strangling her. The encounter of the two faces is repeated in the mirror on the door behind the bed—a second view, as if this were a movie and we were seeing the same action from two camera angles. In the mirror the man looks strangely calm. In the third panel we see the same young man, now reclining, eyes closed, hands folded on his stomach, in another, equally crummy room. The figure is stretched out on a bed with his feet—great lumps in socks—sticking right into the viewer's face. He recedes away from us across the painting, while the rest of the picture is jammed with a chaos of junk—

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chairs, old crockery; on the radiator next to him sits an alarm clock. The color in all the panels, mostly bluish and pinkish grays, rises from a dull, gunmetal dark to occasional, hysterical pinks or yellows. The paintings have a disjointed, demented poetry: the forms seem too big for the spaces, and there is a constriction that goes beyond the physical to the psychic.

Although there would be no way on earth for a gallery-goer to realize it by just looking at the pictures—and this is a point I'll return to—*Murder and its Consequences* grows out of Laderman's reading of one of the Inspector Maigret novels, those fast-moving, beautifully wrought *policiers* by the French writer Georges Simenon that have such a big following among intellectuals. *Maigret and the Loner,* published in France in 1971, is one of the later Maigrets. The atmosphere is less picturesque than before, and the rawness with which human emotions are presented makes it sometimes almost painful for the reader to go on.

Maigret and the Loner opens in a hot, muggy, tourist-ridden Paris (it sounds rather like New York in summer) and Inspector Maigret is glad to leave his office when he is called to Les Halles (this is before the market has moved). In an abandoned building scheduled to be razed, he is confronted with the corpse of a bearded man who looks to be in his sixties: he's lying flat on his bed, dressed in rags, but with impeccably groomed hands and hair. He's been shot three times in his chest, apparently while sleeping. The room is littered with odd objects—things obviously pulled off the street—and everything about the case is strange: the condition of the room, the exceptionally finely groomed tramp, and the rarity of tramps being get murdered. Eventually, Maigret learns that the man is Marcel Vivien, who twenty years ago walked out on his wife, his eight-year-old daughter, and a successful business for a girl of nineteen—Nina Lassave. It's one of those classic Simenon stories of the character who drops out of society. He and Nina hung out together for a few months, until he caught her one day with another man; in a fit of hopeless rage, he strangled her. There was an investigation, but both Marcel and the other lover, Louis Mahossier, got off. Marcel drifted into the underlife of Les Halles. But Louis Mahossier, although he married and made a great success in business, was equally in love with Nina. And when, one night twenty years later, coming out of a restaurant in Les Halles, he recognized Marcel Vivien, he ran home for his pistol and returned to murder Marcel among the junk and detritus of his wrecked life.

The murders in the Maigret novels are always described at second or third hand, so Laderman has had to invent them to a degree, but the first two panels of *Murder and its Consequences*—the argument and the strangling—stick pretty close to the novel. Scene three—with a still-young Marcel lying amidst the junk of his Les Halles hideout—is not so clearly related. Looking at the painting, you can't be sure if Marcel is asleep or dead—so the scene could be Laderman's imagining of Marcel just after his arrival in Les Halles, as a young man contemplating his ruined life, or else Laderman has pushed the second murder up in time, to bring it closer to the time of the strangling.

I've talked to a number of people who saw *Murder and its Consequences, Part Two* at Schoelkopf and found it hopelessly ambiguous. It does have a bit of the quality you sometimes feel in New Wave movies (and the movies that have been influenced by them), where you don't exactly know what's going on and aren't sure if you're just being dense, or if its intentional, or if the director's off his rocker. This ambiguity flies in the face of most current attempts at narrative painting, which have aimed at a sharp-focus clarity. Jack Beal's titles, for instance, always match his paintings: *Harvest* shows two people picking autumn vegetables, in *Hope, Faith, Charity,* Charity holds a coin. This legibility is perfectly all right, except that in recent practice the paintings with clear messages have usually turned out to feel one-dimensional, probably because the

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themes aren't enlarged by the viewers' recognition of some commonly held experience or belief. *Certainly Murder and its Consequences* doesn't send out a clear message, but Laderman's very lack of clarity may signal a new and interesting approach. Laderman's figure composition has nothing in common with the religious art of the Western world, which assumed a general viewer's immediate sympathy; his work is more related to the secular figure composition of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, which was designed for an educated elite. In an article in *Artforum* in 1970, Laderman called for "a truly elite art . . . in which artist and patron share an esoteric knowledge, such as that shared by the Sung painters and patrons." Simenon is the esoteric (or not-so-very esoteric) knowledge that will unlock *Murder and its Consequences*; but the narrative here is probably esoteric on another level, since what Laderman really asks of the viewer is a poetic rather than a literal reading. Laderman leads us to expect old-fashioned storytelling; but then he makes us respond to the painting as if it were the private dream-narrative of a Surrealist—a better Delvaux. Following Laderman from the paintings into the Maigret and then back to the paintings has given me a kind of exhilaration rare in my experience of current art: for once, a real pictorial imagination is wrestling with a real literary imagination.

The fact that *Murder and its Consequences* is based on Simenon is the big tip-off—you really don't have to read *Maigret and the Loner,* doing so only deepens your understanding. The name Simenon alerts the viewer to expect a parable of the collapse of bourgeois life in the face of dark passions (that's Simenon's persistent subject), in the way Poussin's classical references tip you off—even if you haven't read Ovid—to the beautifully distanced, nostalgic tone of his moralizing. Simenon, with his wealth of chamber-sized scenes from modern life, is an inspired choice as the subject for figure composition, and Laderman's use of him has reminded me of Guy Davenport's comment, in his essay on Balthus, that the world of Balthus's *The Passage du Commerce Saint-André,* with its muffled mysteries, is the world of Inspector Maigret.

There are things in *Maigret and the Loner* that you could see Balthus being attracted to. The girl is always described as very young, pretty but unadorned, dressed in black. In death she might be the woman pictured in that most grisly of all Balthuses—*The Victim*—though it's a stabbing, not a strangling. Through Simenon, Laderman has keyed into the sleazy side of Balthus in a way no other American painter ever has: when Americans are inspired by Balthus, they usually give us Balthus with the kinks removed. The slightly nauseating color in *Murder and its Consequences,* the love with which Laderman has painted all those ugly New York apartment moldings, the weird spider-shadows, the disturbed, too-close compositions—all of this puts you on the defensive. Laderman gets you there, and then he carries the whole mess up—as Balthus did in his queerest paintings of the 1940s—into the realm of high, elitist art. *Murder and its Consequences* is the best narrative painting ever done in America. Marcel Vivien amidst the chaos of his junk-heap room is a trashy-tragic figure. This group of paintings is a shocker; it takes us into the back rooms of modern experience just as Manet's *Olympia* and *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* did, back in the 1860s. Laderman's great subject—darker toned than anything in Manet—is the miseries beneath the splendors of life in New York, 1984.

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Don DeLillo's America

by Bruce Bawer

Try as one might, it is difficult to avoid Don DeLillo forever. He may not be a bestseller, but his books seem—at times anyway—to be ubiquitous. His new novel, *White Noise,*[1] is his eighth, and it has all but one of its predecessors to keep it company on bookstore shelves. For DeLillo has, somehow, managed to become a member of that elite circle of writers whose books are kept in print. It's strange: there are titles by Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner that are not easy to locate even at reputable literary bookstores; but at many such establishments one can, without any trouble, find the novels of DeLillo in attractive, attention-getting Vintage paperback editions, their uniform front covers decorated with striking, surrealistic, black-and-white photographs, their back covers (and front matter) crammed with critical testimony that this fellow is, no question about it, *the* novelist of our times. "He has a chillingly persuasive view," writes Bruce Allen, "of who we are in the Twentieth Century and where we might be going." He is a master of "modern alienation and violence" *(The Washington Post)*; he, "more than any other novelist to emerge in this decade [the Seventies], . . . knows the spoiled goods of America" (Thomas LeClair in *The New Republic*); he is in touch with "the sinister ambiguities, the floating ugliness of America's recent history" (John Updike); he meditates "on the excesses of contemporary thought" (Christopher Lehmann-Haupt); he reflects "our era's nightmares and hallucinations" (Abe C. Ravitz, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*).

Our era is, indeed, much on DeLillo's mind. Another author might write a novel because he has found himself possessed by a character, a setting, a single line of dialogue that resonates in his mind and demands that he listen. Not Don DeLillo. Most of his novels were born out of a preoccupation with a single theme: namely, that contemporary American society is the worst enemy that the cause of human individuality and self-realization has ever had. In one semi-surrealist opus after another, DeLillo has told the story of a conspicuously successful American who jumps off the assembly line and, in one way or another, tries to—well—"find himself." *End Zone* (1972), for instance, is the story of Gary Harkness, a college football player who is revolted by the doctrine of "team spirit"; America, he says, is "becoming a nation devoted to human xerography," and he wants to be more than a photocopy. So he leaves a promising gridiron career at Penn State and ends up playing ball at an obscure college in west Texas. *Great Jones Street* (1973) is about a rock star, Bucky Wunderlick, who, convinced his fans are not responding to him as individuals anymore but simply as a mob, drops out of his band in the middle of a successful tour and moves into a seedy East Village flat, where he

1 *White Noise,* by Don DeLillo; Viking, 326 pages, $16.95.

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becomes the focus of a bizarre drug plot straight out of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. In *Players* (1977), a young stockbroker named Lyle Wynant leaves Yuppiedom behind when his fascination with a murder at the Stock Exchange leads him to become involved with terrorists. In *The Names* (1982), James Axton, an international businessman disenchanted with the life of a corporate jet-setter, is intrigued by an unusual series of cult murders in Greece and the Mideast; like Wynant, he becomes increasingly obsessed—and, ultimately, involved—with the killers.

One thing that these novels all share, aside from the goodbye-American-dream motif, is a stunning implausibility. Representation of reality is not DeLillo's strong suit. It's hard to accept most of his characters as living, breathing human beings, or to conjure up a clear picture of Logos College in *End Zone* or the huge, futuristic scientific institute called Field Experiment Number One in *Ratner's Star* (1976), or to believe in the existence of all these cliques, clans, and cabals—the conspiracy in *Players,* the Transparanoia Corporation and Happy Valley Farm Commune in *Great Jones Street,* the cult in *The Names,* or the secret intelligence network, Radial Matrix, in *Running Dog* (1978). "There are no stockbrokers, terrorists, or wives—dehumanized or not—in *Players,*" writes Stephen Koch. "There are only words, inky squiggles on a page, telling us things that we do not believe." Robert Towers makes a similar observation about *The Names*: "[T]he very existence of the cult, which is crucial to the central action of the novel, is never made plausible—at least to me." Me neither.

But then, these novels are not meant to be true-to-life tales. They are tracts, designed to batter us, again and again, with a single idea: that life in America today is boring, benumbing, dehumanized. Not only has the American system robbed us of our individuality; the era's despicable technological innovations have afflicted us all with a dreadful condition known as "sensory overload"—a term introduced by a character in *Great Jones Street*:

> "A man in Missouri spent a hundred and sixty-one days in a deep cavern . . . . He ate canned food, he drank water, he burned over nine hundred candles. He said it's the first time in his life he wasn't bored. Sensory overload. People are withdrawing from sensory overload. Technology. Whenever there's too much technology, people return to primitive feats . . . ."

Return to primitivism: this, in different ways and to varying degrees, is what the protagonists do in most of DeLillo's novels. Harkness's tiny Texas college, Wunderlick's East Village flat, Wynant's terrorists, and Axton's cult are all versions of the Missourian's cave—they are places to escape to, refuges from a technologically overdeveloped society whose major achievement, DeLillo would have us believe, is to have dragged us further and further away from our true selves.

And what *are* our true selves? DeLillo's answer to that question is clear. To DeLillo, to be human means to be, at heart, a primitive beast; those of us who live in high-tech America are, therefore, more out of touch with our humanness than any humans who have ever lived. To "find oneself" one must, like the Missouri caveman, return to primitivism; and in the world according to DeLillo, returning to primitivism means, in essence, entering into a community, conspiracy, or subculture governed largely by primitive violence. In DeLillo's overly diagrammatic world, savagery is the only alternative to depersonalization by means of sensory overload; only through a pure, brute physicality can one reclaim one's selfhood. Of course, the violence has to be the right sort of violence; in America, you see, we don't even *murder* properly. "We do the wrong kind of killing in America," says James Axton in *The Names.* "It's a form of consumerism. It's the logical extension of consumer fantasy. People shooting from overpasses, barricaded houses. Pure image." The American brand of violence is, in other words, too impersonal, too deliberate, too media-oriented. The right kind, of course, is the intimate, unconsidered kind. "Mindless

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violence," says Azarian, Wunderlick's manager in *Great Jones Street,* "is the only true philosophical violence." "One way of betraying the revolution," says a terrorist in *Players,* "is to advance theories about it . . . . Theory is an effete diversion . . . . The only worthwhile doctrine is calculated madness." At the heart of each of DeLillo's novels is the assumption that, deep down, all human beings long to wreak havoc, to run wild, to kill. The narrator of *Players* alludes to "the glamour of revolutionary violence . . . the secret longing it evokes in the most docile soul," and Axton, in *The Names,* suggests that "There must be times when a society feels the purest virtue lies in killing."

It is not only the conspiracy-happy protagonists of *Players* and *The Names* that are drawn to barbarism. Harkness, in *End Zone,* who enjoys reading about atrocities, manifestly considers football to be a wonderful savage ritual of sorts, and the inflicting of pain upon other players a primal sacrament; he speaks longingly of "kill[ing] with impunity," of "d[ying] in the celebration of ancient ways." Wunderlick, in *Great Jones Street,* feels much the same way about his music, which he wishes could be as destructive ("destruction is such fun"!) as football: "What I'd really like to do," he says, "is injure people with my sound. Maybe actually kill some of them. They'd come there knowing full well. Then we'd play and sing and people in the audience would be frozen with pain or writhing with pain and some of them would actually die from the effects of our words and music . . . . That's art, sweetheart." DeLillo is not being facetious here, not making fun of Wunderlick, hard as it may be to believe; each of his novels provides ample evidence that, to DeLillo, art—in present-day America, anyway—has got to confront the primitive yearning, deep inside every human soul, to kill, maim, and destroy.

Why? Because if you don't, you're denying your humanness. It's better, DeLillo seems to say in one novel after another, to be a marauding, murderous maniac—and therefore a *human*—than to sit still for America as it is, with its air-conditioners, assembly lines, television sets, supermarkets, synthetic fabrics, and credit cards. At least when you're living a life of primitive violence, you're closer to the mystery at the heart of it all. That's what life is to DeLillo: a mystery, an enigma. His books are full of codes, ciphers, secret names and places and organizations. Most of the books take the form of suspense stories (why is the cult murdering these people in *The Names*? what do the conspirators want with Wunderlick in *Great Jones Street*? what's the meaning of the interplanetary radio signal in *Ratner's Star*?) but—significantly—the clues never add up to much of anything. By the end of the typical DeLillo novel, in fact, things are hovering pretty near the point of utter incomprehensibility. What is always clear, however, is that one is supposed to come away from these novels convinced that life is a teleological puzzle that no novelist (or scientist, for that matter) is ever going to piece together—a mystery that technological advances can only serve to distance us from.

Needless to say, DeLillo's newest novel, *White Noise,* represents yet another go at these rapidly aging nihilistic clichés. This time around, the passenger on the Primitivism Express is Jack Gladney, professor of (like it or not) Hitler Studies at a large Eastern college. Though, like all DeLillo heroes, Jack is a connoisseur of destruction, and though he starts making gibes about our stifling assembly-line culture on the first page of the book, it takes an "airborne toxic event" in his hometown to make him truly frantic about his mortality and the unrelieved emptiness of his life. It doesn't help any, either, when he discovers that his wife Babette, a teacher of posture, has slept with another man, a quack doctor who claims to have developed a drug that eradicates the fear of death. Though it is less surrealist than any of his previous novels, *White Noise* —as is par for the course with DeLillo— grows steadily darker, more fantastic, its direction less and less clear. Jack, like Axton in *The Names,* grows obsessive, loses touch

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with his family, breaks out of his structured existence. He learns from his colleague Murray that "there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers" (mainly, it seems, because we don't have the guts to be killers). "Violence," Murray explains, "is a form of rebirth," murder a means of self-liberation. Jack decides he is a killer. He starts carrying a gun with him to school; eventually he steals the neighbors' car and, rod in tow, seeks out the quack doctor.

There should be profound emotions at work here, but *White Noise* is, like its predecessors, so masterfully contrived a piece of argumentation that believable human feelings and actions are few and far between. There is hardly a natural moment in the whole book. Characters do not think, they cogitate; they do not talk, they engage in dialectic and deliver endless monologues about the novel's major themes. It is often difficult to tell them apart when reading a stretch of dialogue, because they all sound exactly alike. Indeed, with rare exceptions, they all *think* exactly alike. When they are not pondering the significance of one contemporary American phenomenon or another (e.g., supermarkets, TV commercials, the *National Enquirer*), they are contemplating life, death, and the cosmos. And when their mouths open, they produce clipped, ironic, self-consciously clever sentences full of offbeat metaphors and quaint descriptive details.

The first conversation in *White Noise* is typical. Jack has returned home from campus, where he has watched the new students and their parents arriving for the beginning of the fall term; he tells Babette, "You should have been there," and describes for her the long line of station wagons: "Blue, green, burgundy. They gleamed in the sun like a desert caravan." Babette replies:

> "It's not the station wagons I wanted to see. What are the people like? Do the women wear plaid skirts, cable-knit sweaters? Are the men in hacking jackets? What's a hacking jacket?"
>
> "They've grown comfortable with their money," I said. "They genuinely believe they're entitled to it. This conviction gives them a kind of rude health. They glow a little."
>
> "I have trouble imagining death at that income level," she said.
>
> "Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands."

They're off. And for the remainder of the book, that's how Jack and Babette talk, to each other and everyone else. It's consistently fast-paced and facile, and occasionally witty, and absolutely *never* sounds like two married people talking to each other. Most of the time it sounds just like what it is: an author's collection of stale cultural barbs, broken up, essentially at random, into lines of dialogue. It's bad enough that the above passage, with its interchangeable quips about the station-wagon set, should occur on the fourth page of the book, when we should be getting to know the characters; what's even more silly is that, later in the novel, when Babette tells Jack about her motel-room liaison with the quack doctor, their conversation is equally superficial. "You entered a motel room," says Jack, "excited by its impersonality, the functionalism and bad taste of the furnishings. You walked barefoot on the fire-retardant carpet . . . . You lay on the bed, embracing. Then he entered you." Babette's response, naturally, is: "Don't use that term. You know how I feel about that usage." *Functionalism, fire-retardant, usage*—is this the language of a bitter husband and a contrite wife? Of course not. It's the language of a novelist who's more intrigued by words than by the feelings they are supposed to represent, more concerned with slipping in a brief, banal set piece on the bland impersonality of American motel rooms than with trying to understand, and render as faithfully as possible, the feelings his characters would be likely to have in the situation he has put them in.

Life—life itself, that queer entity that Flaubert and Tolstoy and Thomas Mann somehow never grew tired of describing—does not interest DeLillo at all; for him, life

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seems to exist so that we can theorize about it. He never leaves anything alone and just lets it *be*. His narrator and characters, in *White Noise* as elsewhere, are always knee-jerk generalizers. The introductory description of Babette, for instance ("Babette is tall and fairly ample . . . . Her hair is a fanatical blond mop"), turns within a couple of sentences into a broad, seemingly frivolous general statement, the only apparent purpose of which could be to reduce Babette to a stereotype: "If she were a petite woman, the hair would be too cute, too mischievous and contrived. Ample women do not plan such things. They lack the guile for conspiracies of the body." Later in the novel, Jack observes that his teenage son's hairline is receding, wonders guiltily whether he might be at fault ("Have I raised him, unwittingly, in the vicinity of a chemical dump site . . . ?"), and before you know it has happily found himself a suitable generality: "Man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death." DeLillo's, quite clearly, is a mind that lets itself be violated by any old idea that happens along.

If you like your novels studded with these kinds of Philosophy McNuggets, you'll love *White Noise*. Lead a character in this novel into a supermarket, bank, or kitchen, and—presto!—he launches, unbidden, into an impromptu interpretive essay, the thrust of which is that deep beneath the surface of our plastic culture lurk the manifold mysteries of human existence. When Jack runs into Murray at the supermarket, for example, Murray explains to him that the market—a key setting in the novel—"recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data." To be sure,

> "Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability . . . ."

Jack goes to the bank, checks out his account balance on the computer, and launches into an ironic rhapsody when the computer's figures match his: "[t]he system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction . . . . The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies." (Cf. *The Names*: "It's the inner consistencies we have to search for. The symmetries, the harmonies, the mysteries, the whisperies.") Even Bee, Jack's twelve-year-old daughter by a previous marriage, finds it necessary to set the symbolism out on the table. Speaking of her mother's kitchen, she says: "It's not a kitchen at all. It's her life, her middle age. Baba [Babette] could enjoy a kitchen like that. It would be a kitchen to her. To Mother it's like a weird symbol of getting through a crisis, except she hasn't gotten through it." (Does any twelve-year-old actually talk this way?)

Of course, supermarkets and banks and kitchens can hold symbolic meanings for people. But why, pray tell, must those meanings be talked about endlessly, with such awesome banality and at such tiresome, unrevealing length? DeLillo's purpose in having his characters carry on about supermarkets and banks, of course, is chiefly ironic: to him, such phenomena are paramount signs of the dehumanization of America. He is, as might be expected, especially devoted to the tiredest of all contemporary clichés, the one about the tyranny of television. In *White Noise,* as in *Players* (at the beginning of which Lyle Wynant is a cathode-ray addict of psychotic proportions), DeLillo portrays the American mind, high and low, as being haunted constantly by sounds and im-

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ages from the tube. At times, to be sure, he comes close to a perceptive characterization of the role that commercial slogans, jingles, and brand names play in some TV-centered American households, interpolating, for instance, stray sentences from the Gladney family's television set into the stream of dialogue. But DeLillo defeats any hope of verisimilitude by going way overboard. During the "airborne toxic event," he has Jack describe the huge black cloud of poisonous Nyodene gas (the novel's major symbol) as "resembl[ing] a national promotion for death, a multimillion-dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy print and billboard, TV saturation." This description does not help the reader to see the cloud, or serve to consolidate its symbolic pre-eminence in the book; it tends, rather, to diminish it. It is inconceivable that a man whose family was threatened by a cloud of toxic gas would describe it in such a way. The simile is an utterly contrived one, dictated not by the author's intuitive gift for imagery but by his polemical motives, his obsession with commercialism. The only image it fixes in the mind is one of DeLillo himself, sitting at his typewriter, mechanically tapping out his book.

This sort of heavyhanded theme-mongering goes on throughout *White Noise*. When the Nyodene cloud forces the Gladneys to evacuate their house and spend the night at an emergency relocation center, Jack hears his daughter Steffie mutter something in her sleep. "It seemed important," Jack tells us, "that I know what it was. In my current state, bearing the death impression of the Nyodene cloud, I was ready to search anywhere for signs and hints, intimations of odd comfort." As he listens to Steffie mumble in "a language not quite of this world," he struggles to understand:

> I was convinced she was saying something, fitting together units of stable meaning. I watched her face, waited. Ten minutes passed. She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.
>
> *Toyota Celica.*

How does DeLillo get away with such stale gags?

DeLillo's people don't talk about things, if they can help it; they talk about the *nature* of things. Jack's smug, brainy fourteen-year-old son Heinrich (the successor of obnoxiously brilliant adolescents in *The Names* and *Ratner's Star*) likes to expatiate upon the nature of modern knowledge: "What good is knowledge if it just floats through the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything." Murray, for his part, discourses pretentiously about "the nature of modern death": "It has a life independent of us. It is growing in prestige and dimension . . . . We can take cross-section pictures of it, tape its tremors and waves . . . . But it continues to grow, to acquire breadth and scope, new outlets, new passages and means. The more we learn, the more it grows." The less DeLillo's characters have to say, the more they talk.

And when they do, quite often they talk in questions. Not single questions, but long series of questions. Heinrich, who unfortunately never seems to tire of epistemology, responds to a query about what he would like to do by saying, "Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? How can you be sure about something like that? Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How do you know whether something is really what you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain?" And so on, for a longish paragraph, to no apparent authorial purpose. Jack, for his part, is always wondering. When he learns that a doctor has "tapped into [his] history," he wonders about that "history": "Where was it located exactly? Some state or federal agency, some insurance company or credit firm or medical clearinghouse? What history was he referring to? I'd told him some basic things.

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Height, weight, childhood diseases. What else did he know? Did he know about my wives, my involvement with Hitler, my dreams and fears?" When Jack learns that his ex-wife, who lives in an ashram with a swami, wants Heinrich to visit her, he wonders; "Did swami have twinkling eyes? Would he be able to answer the boy's questions where I had failed, provide assurances where I had incited bickering and debate? How final is the Age of Darkness? Does it mean supreme destruction, a night that swallows existence so completely that I am cured of my own lonely dying?" And when Jack catches up with Babette's quack doctor, he wonders some more: "His nose was flat, his skin the color of a Planter's peanut. What is the geography of a spoon-shaped face? Was he Melanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese? Was he a composite? How many people came here for Dylar [the fear-of-death drug]? Where was Surinam? How was my plan progressing?"

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of *White Noise* is Jack's fascination with Hitler. The dictator is the subject not only of his professional research but of his private obsessions. He has hitched his wagon to Hitler because, as Murray tells him, "You thought [Hitler] would protect you." Jack admits as much when he explains why he named his son Heinrich: "I thought it had an authority that might cling to him. I thought it was forceful and impressive and I still do. I wanted to shield him, make him unafraid." He tells his daughter Denise:

> "There's something about German names, the German language, German *things.* I don't know what it is exactly. It's just there. In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course."
>
> "He was on again last night."
>
> "He's always on. We couldn't have television without him."
>
> "They lost the war," she said. "How great could they be?"
>
> "A valid point. But it's not a question of greatness. It's not a question of good and evil. I don't know what it is. Look at it this way. Some people always wear a favorite color. Some people carry a gun. Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer. It's in this area that my obsessions dwell."

Keep in mind that this is DeLillo's idea of a sympathetic character. Indeed, we are clearly meant to see Jack as the archetypal twentieth-century victim—a victim whose sense of helplessness is so profound that he cannot help but succumb to the temptation, shocking but psychologically understandable, to identify with the aggressor; and since Jack is the archetypal twentieth-century victim, whom else could DeLillo have him identify with but the century's premier aggressor, Adolf Hitler?

White Noise is not, as it happens, the first DeLillo novel in which Hitler has made an appearance. Quite the contrary. Germany, Nazism, Hitler haunt DeLillo's novels the way Maud Gonne haunts the poetry of Yeats. The reason is obvious: Hitler is the ultimate example of twentieth-century man reverting to primitivism. If the nature of humanity is essentially a dark mystery, Hitler is the murderous monster at the heart of that darkness. He is (so DeLillo seems to feel) all of us writ large. This, presumably, is why there is a rock group in *Great Jones Street* named Schicklgruber and, in *End Zone,* a character named Hauptfuhrer; it is why, in the latter novel, there is a student who wants to "get my hair dyed blond so everybody will think I'm one of those small blondie boys with that faraway look in their eyes who used to be so big on the Himmelplatz three or four decades ago." It's why the putative pornographic film at the thematic center of *Running Dog* turns out to be not pornography at all but a film of Hitler, in derby, wing collar, baggy pants, and boutonniere, doing an imitation of Charlie Chaplin. It's why, in *White Noise,* Jack and Murray compare notes on their respective scholarly subjects, Hitler and Elvis, and discover that the two men were really very much alike. DeLillo's point, throughout, is unmistakable: Hitler was just like us. We are all Hitler.

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Am I alone in finding this whole business extremely offensive? DeLillo's offense, to my mind, is that he refuses to make distinctions. To him, as to Jack Gladney, the question of Hitler is simply "not a question of good and evil." Nor, it is clear, do moral considerations enter into his appraisal of any human act. A craving for primitive destructiveness dwells deep in all our hearts, DeLillo's books insist; it is what makes us human. But is DeLillo honestly interested in what makes us human? I submit that he is not. His characters are little more than authorial mouthpieces, all but interchangeable with one another. And what makes human beings fascinating, and worth writing novels about, is their differences. Real people talk differently and think differently and have different interests and tastes and fears. None of this is reflected in DeLillo's novels. It is impossible, in the end, to accept his characters as human beings, or to take his novels seriously as representations of reality. All they amount to, really, is documents in the history of nihilistic chic.

But it is probably *déclassé* of me to try to discuss DeLillo's novels as representations of reality. "Surely," I can hear DeLillo's devotees saying, "you realize his true subject is not 'real life' at all, or even *ideas* about life, but words, words, words—language, codes of every kind, the whole question of signification?" Very well, it's true: DeLillo's narrators and characters *are* constantly talking about language. Football, Harkness tells us in *End Zone,* "is the one sport guided by language, by the word signal, the snap number, the color code, the play name." The murders in *The Names* are likewise guided by language: Axton's cult chooses its victims by their initials. DeLillo's characters are, as a rule, unusually sensitive to words, often worrying, in casual conversation with friends and family, about whether they've used *le mot juste.* (Pammy, in *Players*: "Is that right —'precipitate'?" Lyle: "I think so . . . . Maybe not quite.")

Words—the very sound or look of them, utterly divorced from their meanings—alternately hurt and comfort these people. A man named Wally Pippich, in *End Zone,* tells Harkness that "[s]ome names produce a negative gut reaction in my mind. Cyd Charisse. Mohandas K. Gandhi. Xerxes." Billy Twillig, the fourteen-year-old mathematical genius who is the protagonist of *Ratner's Star,* similarly finds that "[s]ome words frightened him slightly in their intimation of compressed menace. 'Gout.' 'Ohm.' 'Ergot.' 'Pulp.' These seemed organic sounds having little to do with language, meaning or the ordered contours of simple letters of the alphabet. Other words had a soothing effect . . . ." Lyle Wynant in *Players* is soothed by words, too. He finds the names of certain suburbs "wonderfully restful. They're a liturgical prayer, a set of moral considerations." In *End Zone,* Harkness recalls a sign ("WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH THE TOUGH GET GOING") that his father put in his room: "The sentiment of course had small appeal but it seemed that beauty flew from the words themselves, the letters, consonants swallowing vowels, aggression and tenderness, a semi-self-recreation from line to line, word to word, letter to letter. All meaning faded. The words became pictures. It was a sinister thing to discover at such an age, that words can escape their meanings. A strange beauty that sign began to express." Owen Brademas, an archaeologist in *The Names,* also finds beauty in words without meanings. Speaking of the stone tablets he has uncovered, he says, "I've begun to see a mysterious importance in the letters as such, the blocks of characters." He finds "those beautiful shapes . . . so strange and reawakening. It goes deeper than conversations, riddles. It's an unreasoning passion."

"Liturgical prayer," "strange beauty," "unreasoning passion." There is a distinct parallelism in these novels: as characters escape high-tech civilization, so words escape their meanings. The latter escape, like the former, appears to represent to DeLillo some triumphant, ritualistic shedding of false trappings. And indeed, in many a DeLillo novel, when the protagonist bids adieu to his xerographic former life, his language becomes

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reduced to meaningless sounds or disconnected words. Harkness, in *End Zone,* refers to his year at Logos College as a time of "words broken into brute sound." Pammy Wynant, in *Players,* after watching a movie in which a boy suffers "reduced sensibility" (meaning that he is "either unable to speak or refusing to") passes under a sign that reads "TRANSIENTS" and is confused by it: "It took on an abstract tone, as words had done before in her experience (although rarely), subsisting in her mind as language units that had mysteriously evaded the responsibilities of content." And Bucky Wunderlick, who in *Great Jones Street* goes into hiding knowing that his closest followers are waiting for him to "return with a new language for them to speak," is in the end injected with a drug that will make it impossible for him to put words together to create meaning. As a result he spends "[s]everal weeks of immense serenity" on "that unimprinted level where all sound is silken and nothing erodes in the mad weather of language."

There is more, much more, to be said about language in the novels of Don DeLillo —especially in *The Names* and *Ratner's Star,* which are absolutely chock-full of references to the "secret power" of names, to "[t]he mystery of alphabets, the contact with death and oneself," to the notion that "a secret name is a way of escaping the world . . . an opening into the self," that "[t]he universe is the name of G-dash-d," that "[m]eaningless sounds, abstract symbols . . . have the power of creation," and so forth. Though DeLillo's philosophy of language is not perfectly coherent or consistent, it is clear that his preoccupation is not with language as a means of communicating sophisticated ideas and complicated feelings, but with language as ritual. The ultimate purpose of language, DeLillo seems to feel, is not to convey meaning but simply to affirm one's existence. Language—especially language freed of the rhetorical trappings of "civilization" and the illusion that scientific progress leads to greater understanding—is, simply, the cry of human identity. This idea dominates the end of *The Names,* when James Axton, at the Parthenon, is surrounded by people speaking a variety of tongues and realizes that "[t]his is what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language." The fundamental importance of language as a ritual of identity is likewise suggested toward the end of *White Noise,* when Jack wonders: "Is there something so innocent in the recitation of names that God is pleased?"

One cannot deny that all this is at least theoretically interesting. And it is certainly conceivable that a compelling novel of ideas might be built on an intellectual foundation much like the one I have outlined. DeLillo, however, has yet to write it. Though his preoccupation with the philosophy of language occasionally yields thought-provoking, or at least memorably expressed, observations (e.g., "Mathematics is what the world is when we subtract our own perceptions"), it generally results in little more than one discouraging battery after another of pointless, pretentious rhetoric. He does not develop ideas so much as juggle jargon.

What makes the case of Don DeLillo especially unfortunate is that he does have real talent. He has always had a flair for humor—dark humor, naturally, of the Vonnegut-Heller sort—and that gift, in particular, is demonstrated in *White Noise* more abundantly than in any of DeLillo's previous books. But his continuing lack of interest in developing his characters and ideas, and his stubborn adherence to a stylish, schematic view of modern America as a great big xerox machine, continue to cripple DeLillo as an imaginative writer. It's ironic. While those of us who live in the real America carry on with our richly varied, emotionally tumultuous lives, DeLillo (as *White Noise* amply demonstrates) continues, in effect, to write the same lifeless novel over and over again—a novel constructed upon a simpleminded political cliché, populated by epigram-slinging, epistemology-happy robots, and packed with words that have very little to say to us about our world, our century, or ourselves. If anyone is guilty of turning modern Americans into xerox copies, it is Don DeLillo.

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Poems *by Elizabeth Spires & William Logan*

Two shadows

for Madison

When we are shadows watching over shadows,
when years have passed, enough to live
two lives, when we have passed
through love and come out speechless
on the other side, I will remember
how we spent a night, walking the streets
in August, side by side,
following two shadows dressed in long grey coats,
unseasonable clothes they didn't seem to mind,
walking so easily, with easy stride,
merging for a moment, then isolate,
as they led us to your street, your door,
and up the steps until, inside,
love became articulate: eye, lip, and brow.
When we are shadows watching over shadows,
we will not speak of it but *know,* and turn
again toward each other tenderly,
shadow to shadow.

—*Elizabeth Spires*

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Street scene

Two acrobats, in red, in green,
cut out of cardboard, jointed & joined
at the hands, six inches high,
dance without thinking under the sky.
One bows at the waist & pulls
the other up, steps backward & falls
to its knees, proposing formally.
Off to one side, the sidewalk vendor smiles,
pleased that we'd like to believe
the little acrobats are *alive,* not tied
by trick or illusion to a lifeline.
He has a suitcase of their twins,
their faces, pale stencils of desire,
identical: they neither laugh nor cry.
Their balance is precarious. Unable,
in love, to unlock hands, they move,
they dance. They do not see us, eyes
locked into the other's narrow glance.

—*Elizabeth Spires*

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To the honourable committee

Though now the act is almost commonplace,
to ask relief from strangers courts disgrace;
but done by scholars, poets, and artistes
who worship galleries instead of priests,
it has an almost moral virtue when
it keeps the breathless arts in oxygen.
Arranged around your table, round or square,
the poems can't make coffee, carve a pear,
or hammer carpet tacks through concrete blocks.
They'll never open combination locks.
Great Fannie Mae has ruled: no banker shall
accept a sonnet as collateral,
and in revenge, perhaps, for which give thanks,
the poet never reads his work in banks.
Rude politicians think it rather funny
a poet has a hard time earning money,
or if he earns a bit, and then relaxes,
the IRS will seize his sons for taxes.
Biographers are wont then to distort
impedimenta of the common sort,
for poets, like their neighbors, cannot pass
for saints, or martyrs, when they mow the grass.
Though verse be undercooked or overdone
it is unread by all and bought by none,
and so within the democratic state
a poet has a democratic fate.
Because he asks foundations for largesse
who once to kings had ventured in distress,
the poet may be tempted to complain
and soothe with quarrel his distempered brain,
or play the miser, who having priced his words
reduced his speech by half, and then two-thirds.
In time it may be judged by your committee
an artist's cast reserve just masks self-pity,
or that for those compression makes obscure
a weekend on the rack's the only cure.

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Most honourable sirs, you must remain
as cold as snow, unprejudiced as rain,
but spend compassionate amounts on those
whose lives were better spent in writing prose.
As you divide the odder from the oddest,
look last on this request, which is immodest:
with your award, I'd ask leave to explore
the rundown harbors of a foreign shore
and for a year there rent a terrace house
unfrequented by *Time* or Mickey Mouse.
Like Novocaine, loud supplications numb
an eleemosynary institution.
If scrupulous, a poet will refine
the silence at the end of every line
and thus, in this as elsewhere, rather throw
his voice toward silence than fortissimo.
Good sirs, I ask approval of this grant.
With kind regards, your humble applicant,

—*William Logan*

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Music

Live from the Met

by Samuel Lipman

The Metropolitan Opera is not simply a great presenting institution. Because the Met is both our most important American opera company and one of the six or so world leaders in operatic production, it has a duty beyond doing vocally and theatrically attractive performances of important works. Such an accomplishment, valuable and difficult as it is, is hardly enough, for it suggests that artists need preach only to the converted. But under the conditions of modern democratic life the audience for high art, a category to which opera now assuredly belongs, is not necessarily self-generating or self-perpetuating. The duty of great artistic institutions is to reach out to a public wider than the closed circle of devotees and fans and to help that public witness, understand, and participate in the art—perhaps even to become the seed bed of something genuinely new and permanent. The goal can all be summed up in one word: education.

To its credit, the Metropolitan Opera has long understood that to survive it must do much more than satisfy the pleasures of a relatively small group of patrons and ticket buyers. For the past half century it has construed its educational task as making the best possible operatic performances available to the largest possible audience. This has meant broadcasts, and in this field the Met, with the devoted sponsorship of Texaco since 1940, has been a leader among American musical institutions. The company's Saturday afternoon broadcasts, complete with intermission features that are amusing and sometimes even instructive, have presented hundreds of operas—sung by the major singers of the day—to a devoted radio audience numbering in the millions. In recent years the Met has embraced television, using the Public Broadcasting Service to carry its performances of several operas a year to an even larger audience, though one significantly less sophisticated.

In gross terms, certainly, the Met's educational performance must be counted a success. The radio listeners, and the television viewers too, have gone on to become a live audience for opera, and even to pay for their pleasures. According to statistics in *Profile: 1984,* a publication of Opera America (the service organization which represents professional opera companies in North America for purposes of general advocacy and governmental lobbying), the total attendance at professional opera events in the United States and Canada during the 1982-83 season was 6,100,000; in addition, members of the audience purchased some 300,000 subscriptions, enabling them to see more than one production. There can be hardly any doubt that the initiating factor in bringing all these people to opera has been, and in most cases still remains, the heroic efforts of the Metropolitan Opera in scattering its riches over the airwaves.

While the Met can take great pride in what it has accomplished, there must be

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here considered a criterion other than mere numbers: the *quality* of what is being taught is at least as important as the size of the student population. The question in this case can be easily posed. Is the Metropolitan Opera conveying in its broadcasts on radio and television, despite all the technological limitations inevitable in electronic reproduction, the *essence* of the great works it is performing? Precisely because the audience is relatively unsophisticated, because it has no memories of other and better artistic experiences for comparison, the Met's responsibility to its listeners and viewers at home is sacred indeed. It is the task of the critic to apply the same standards to what he sees and hears on the Met's broadcasts as he applies to performances at the Metropolitan Opera House itself.

A recent television broadcast of Verdi's *Aida* (January 3) provided just such an opportunity. The widely trumpeted telecast went far to suggest that the Met is not properly fulfilling its functions—either of musico-dramatic production or of aesthetic education.

Whether by design or not, the *Aida* telecast served as a command performance for the great American soprano Leontyne Price on the occasion of her retirement from the operatic stage. Thus, it labored under several major handicaps. Miss Price, it need hardly be remarked, is not retiring because she is in mid-career; she is wise enough to know that she has come to the end of the road as a *prima donna*. Of late the Met has been wary about scheduling *Aida* because its management is conscious of its inability to find the singers capable of doing the opera as it should be done. And the production currently in the Met's warehouses is the unsatisfactory 1960s-trendy production conceived by John Dexter; his attempt to place Verdi on the side of the Third World by casting the Ethiopians as exploited slaves and the Egyptians as religious fanatics was already something of an anachronism when it first entered the Met's repertory in 1976. To these real objections one can imagine certain responses. Price's career has been a proud one, and in recent times her vocal estate has seemed to be getting better. The vital roles of Amneris and Amonasro, Aida's rival and father, could be filled by such worthy artists as the Italian mezzo-soprano Fiorenza Cossotto and the American bass Simon Estes. The production, furthermore, though much criticized, is more up-to-date in outlook and execution than many of the Met's stagings at the present time.

As it turned out, the naysayers should have been listened to. The telecast, virtually from the first moment to the last, was a horror. The major share of responsibility for the outcome, I suppose, must be assigned to the Met's Music Director (and, as of next year, Artistic Director) James Levine. In an opera so dependent on orchestral material for musical point and dramatic force, a great conductor, by exercising his commanding personality, can more than make up for almost every kind of vocal infelicity; Toscanini's opera recordings go far to prove that dictators of the baton do not require stellar casting to get their musical message across. But on the Met telecast, far from being the savior of the evening, Levine was one of the wreckers. Not only was orchestral playing slack and often, in exposed passages, out of tune. From the beginning of the opera to the end one missed direction, integration, and above all the ability to gain tension by necessary changes in tempo. All too often Verdi's music was treated in the manner of Arthur Fiedler's latter-day Evenings at Pops: everything in rigid march time and please don't block the exits. A particularly repellent example of this style of rum-tum Verdi conducting came in the famous Grand March of Act II; in this passage Levine failed utterly to replicate Toscanini's demonstration that popular art need not be vulgar. What contrast Levine provided to this routined indifference came in slow passages, in which the life of the music was replaced by static presentation of what wasn't very good to begin with.

Any consideration of the singing on the *Aida* telecast must perforce begin with Leontyne Price herself. Her first two acts

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were wretched, with her vocal aspect alternating between guttural chest tones and hooting stabs at the high notes. "Ritorna Vincitor," Aida's great showpiece in Act I, was marked by a sacrifice of vocal line to words. The passage is carefully marked by Verdi *triste e dolce* (sadly and sweetly):

I sacri nomi di padre . . . d'amante
Nè profferir poss'io,
Nè ricordar . . .

(The sacred names of father . . . of lover
I cannot utter,
Or remember . . .)

Miss Price screamed this out at the top of her lungs. Throughout the brilliant ensembles which close both the first two acts, her large voice was always prominent, not as singing but rather as frantic yelling. Here too, as elsewhere, when Miss Price was not singing but was still being covered by the camera she resorted to the most clumsy kind of mugging, the silent mouthing of words expressive of her downtrodden condition.

As was properly noted in the New York critical press, Miss Price's singing improved in the final two acts. Her performance of the aria "O patria mia" coming toward the beginning of the Nile Scene was touching—but even here she seemed to croon rather than sing. Where real vocal strength was called for on the aria's final note—a high "A" which Verdi marks *smorzando* (dying away)—Price's sound was an unyielding, though safe, *forte*. And in the duet with Radamès at the end of the opera where no brilliant singing is called for, Miss Price's caution, musical and vocal, rendered the artistic result sentimental and finally boringly repetitious.

James McCracken, singing opposite Miss Price as Radamès, failed utterly both as singer and as dramatic personality. Like Miss Price he is close to sixty, and well past his vocal prime. The famous "Celeste Aida" was badly out of tune and short of breath. Throughout the opera McCracken's high notes conveyed nothing so much as a convincing account of the fright the singer must have felt when confronted by the need to get them out. His acting seemed confined to moving his arms away from their customary position at his side. When he brought them astride his stomach, it was apparently for the purpose of conveying emotion; when he put them straight ahead, as when he clasped a sword, he was apparently showing resolve.

The role of Amonasro—performed by Simon Estes on the telecast—is one of the most touching in grand opera. As the leader of the Ethiopians in their fight against the Egyptians, he must be a stern warrior, defiantly conscious of his slave status *vis-à-vis* the Egyptians. He must also be credible enough as Aida's father to arrange her tricking of Radamès into betraying his fellow countrymen without in any way seeming harsh and cruel. To help the singer manage this feat, Verdi clothes the famous injunction to Aida—

Pensa che un popolo, vinto, straziato
Per te soltanto risorger può . . .

(Think, a martyred, defeated people
Can rise again only through you . . .)

—with a glorious melody, a soaring phrase drawn from his earlier *La forza del destino*. Sadly, on the telecast, though Mr. Estes brought much dignity and straightforward seriousness to the role, his Amonasro failed to catch fire, seeming for all the vocal and dramatic intensity a mere pasteboard mockup rather than a real person.

As Amneris, Fiorenza Cossotto at least contributed a certain authentic quality to the performance. Her voice sounded Italian, and her Italian—*mirabile dictu*—actually sounded like Italian. But her voice was hardly attractive, and her dramatic presence, gotten up as she was in her stylized Egyptian outfit, was sometimes reminiscent of Madame Arcati in Noël Coward's *Blithe Spirit*. Still, her performance at the beginning of the final act managed by its sheer professionalism and stylistic competence to over-

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shadow the usually surefire death scene of Aida and Radamès. Here, if such be needed, was convincing proof not just of the vocal failures of the two principal singers but of something more—their only tangential relationship to Verdi's operatic art.

John Dexter's production begins with a major, disabling flaw: it tries to alter the delicate balance Verdi and his librettist Antonio Ghislanzoni achieved between the conflicting human motives and moral claims of the two contending peoples, the Ethiopians and the Egyptians. Despite Verdi's marked anti-clericalism—he was, at least until his old age, something of an atheist—*Aida* never substitutes individual caprice for the inevitability of fate, and it is the inevitability of fate that separates tragedy from melodrama. Thus in the opera there are no villains: Aida, Radamès, and Amneris are motivated by the passion of love; the Egyptian king no less than Amonasro serves his country; the priests are but the establishment produced by society in order to guarantee its continuity and survival. To balance the virtues, Verdi gives his characters flaws: Radamès lacks the courage to face the consequences of his love for Aida; Aida tricks her beloved into revealing military secrets which she must know will cost him his life; Amonasro uses his daughter as a spy; Amneris cannot decide between love and the state; and the Egyptian king—like his priests—chooses the path of cruelty rather than mercy.

The Metropolitan production, of course, approaches all these matters differently. The Met quite frankly takes sides. In a *New York Times* interview at the time of the production's debut in 1976, John Dexter said:

> What is the triumphal scene all about? . . . It's something barbaric. A lot of people died in that battle. Is that something to rejoice over?

And James Levine was still more explicit:

> The Egyptians are exalting [sic] in the fact that they've literally [sic] trampled the Ethiopian people. Behind it all are the priests. In the first act, they're the ones who are demanding war. In the triumphal scene they're the ones who demand that the King show no mercy to the Ethiopians. The priests are the ones who produced the conflict. They're the ones who accuse Radamès of treason and who pass sentence. They're working out their own neurotic, psychotic thing.

The chickens of what might well be called Dexter's and Levine's operatic peace movement come home to roost in precisely the triumphal scene they find so crucial to understanding what *Aida* is about. Here, in the ballet section which follows the famous march—and for which Verdi's instructions contained in the vocal score read "A group of dancing-girls appears, bringing in the spoils of the conquered"—the Dexter production has a "white" Egyptian and a "black" Ethiopian fight to the death. The fight is brutal and exhausting until the Egyptian receives a metal club from a bystander and uses it to bludgeon the Ethiopian to death. The parable of the unequal battle of the black native against the white colonialist oppressor is clear indeed; so too is the indulgence the production displays toward sadism and worse. Seen in the plush red-and-gold Metropolitan Opera House, the spectacle deforms the true nature of the opera. Seen close-up on a home television screen, the whole business swamps everything around it. More than that, it is revolting and smacks of prurient cruelty.

Had the above failings of performance and production been all that took place on the telecast, matters would have been bad enough. But to the disasters onstage were added intermission features which completed the job of destroying the evening. On paper, I suppose, the lineup of events for the opera's three intermissions must have seemed adequate. A special television edition of the Metropolitan Opera Quiz—hosted by Edwin Newman and featuring musical comedy personality Kitty Carlisle Hart, comic actor Charles Nelson Reilly, and Broadway actress Madeline Kahn—promised little of opera

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but much in sophisticated patter; an interview with Music Director Levine held out the hope that weighty information about the future of the Met might be passed on to an eagerly viewing audience; and finally there was an enticing double bill: an interview with set designer David Reppa and costume designer Peter J. Hall which was introduced by café society intellectual icon Arianna Stassinopoulos walking coyly through the other Met's Temple of Dendur; and a visit to Verdi's estate at Sant'Agata shepherded by the late Francis Robinson, for many years the Met's inimitable and charming public frontman.

With the exception of the Robinson travelogue—the Italian countryside is fetching indeed, and Robinson must have been the most patently sincere opera fan America has ever produced—all the glitzy features, ranging from the merely inconsequential to the generally meretricious, bombed. The quiz panel, all decked out in pouts and giggles, was a travesty of the connoisseur versions that have regularly accompanied the Met's Saturday afternoon broadcasts. Newman began by asking how the panelists first became involved with the "lyric muse." The answers, predictably, did no more than display the kind of narcissism so valuable in pursuing a career on Broadway. Charles Nelson Reilly spoke of having sung in a Connecticut opera chorus and of owning a yacht named "La Bohème." Kitty Carlisle Hart remembered making her debut as Prince Orlofsky in Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus,* and then told a story about Giorgio Tozzi's having thrown her on a prop bed during the course of a performance; because the bed was nothing but solid wood, she trilled, "I nearly broke every bone in my body—and I kept on singing!" Madeline Kahn, seemingly embarrassed to be in such cultured company, began her operatic *vita* with the demure but nonetheless funny (at least to her and to her fellow panelists) words: "It's so hard for me to determine you know exactly when I began, or why, singing, ha! ha! ha!" The great moment, it seems, began when she was a singing waitress "at a Bavarian sort of restaurant." Her usual repertory there (one is tempted to call it her menu) was musical comedy, but the moment of lyrical truth arrived when "a really important customer there, a big Italian man . . . shouted out 'Sing Madame Butterfly.'" So she learned "Un bel dì" and found out that she "could sing that, sort of, that way."

Things now moved from the personal to the cultural. Newman announced that he would show the panel photos of some "celebrated ladies, not all of them opera singers, who have been seen as Carmen on the silver screen." Could the panel please identify them and their films? After Miss Kahn asked winsomely, "Are they true ladies?" the panel went on to name correctly such assorted luminaries as Geraldine Farrar, Rita Hayworth, Dorothy Dandridge, Risë Stevens, and Eleanor Parker; the panel struck out on Viviane Romance. Now Newman brought some "treasures from the Metropolitan Opera archives." At this point viewers might have thought that they had blundered upon some high-toned garage sale. Instead, the quizmaster merely wanted them to identify the operas in which these props were used and the famous singers who had "owned" them. To help the panelists, short excerpts of the relevant music were played. The answers were: Stevens and the silver rose from *Der Rosenkavalier*; Farrar and Cio-Cio-San's fan from *Butterfly* (Miss Kahn, like her colleagues, did not recognize the music until Newman asked "What did the man shout at you that night?"); Pinza and Boris's crown from *Boris Godunov* (Newman now tried the crown on, to general applause and Riley's comment: "I bet you could get a cab with that"); Louise Homer and Amneris's diadem from—surprise—*Aida* (no one could remember Homer even after Newman hinted that she was Samuel Barber's aunt); and, finally, Lauritz Melchior and Siegfried's horn from the *Ring* (here Mrs. Hart came closest, though she thought that the excerpt of Siegfried's horn call came from *Die Walküre* and belonged to Hunding, Siegfried's father,

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rather than from *Siegfried* or *Götterdämmerung*).

Now came time for what Newman called "the desert-island question." If you were shipwrecked on the proverbial island, the panel was asked, which operatic character would you choose to be, and which operatic character (if any) would you want to have with you? Reilly wanted to go as Billy Budd, from Benjamin Britten's opera; he wanted to be accompanied on the island by the doll Olympia, from Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann,* because he loves coloratura singing and "she has a key so you can shut her up." Mrs. Hart wanted to be Cherubino from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* because he was "charming and has two perfectly beautiful arias, and has his whole life ahead of him, so I would be sure to be saved, and someone would come and I would take with me Figaro because he would bring me the latest gossip of the island and I'd always be entertained and I'd have my hair beautifully cut at all times." Miss Kahn appeared to want to be Brünnhilde and have Siegfried with her so that they could have "a nice rest, a couple of deck chairs, take a walk along the beach. They deserve to be together and to be left alone and have a nice rest."

Fortunately, the last question was now at hand. "Six well-known artists who have appeared on 'Live from the Met' telecasts have lent us rare photographs of themselves and the panel must tell us who they are. Now as a hint, along with the photographs, we are going to play a few measures of music of each artist performing. I should mention these are baby pictures, so watch and listen carefully." Here the panelists seemed in their element. Hart immediately identified Luciano Pavarotti, Miss Kahn caught Frederica von Stade, Reilly quickly identified Sherrill Milnes, Mrs. Hart recognized Placido Domingo, and Miss Kahn got Beverly Sills. The panel failed, however, to identify Regine Crespin singing the opening of the final trio from *Rosenkavalier*. Mrs. Hart did make a point, however, of allowing as how most of the artists still smiled just like they did in their baby pictures.

If the object of this edition of the Metropolitan Opera Quiz had been to entertain, rather more might have been expected from Newman's interview in the following intermission with James Levine. This conductor, though still in his early forties, is not only the most powerful artist performing in America today but also a conductor much in demand abroad and an administrator whose actions influence the course of artistic events in the United States and Europe. While he is widely credited with having maintained standards during his tenure at the Met, he has been subject to critical attack for pursuing an overly conservative policy in repertory and for restricting the Met's employment of top-rank conductors. Because not just opera lovers but performers and composers too look to him for information about the Met's future—and leadership in the very future of opera itself—his words on this occasion were looked forward to with interest, and guaranteed a respectful hearing.

Like the other opportunities on the Met telecast, this one too was flubbed. Levine, often more voluble than articulate, made clear that he was concerned with the Met's past, present, and future. He talked about how difficult it was to have to plan for seasons four and five years down the road, and how hard it was to know which older singers would not remain employable and which younger singers would have ripened. He was happy that most of the world's major singers still wanted to devote time to the Met. In answer to a question from Newman about how important the availability of particular artists was in the choice of repertory, Levine said simply, "It's everything." He did say that one of his concerns was preserving a broad repertory; he was "very excited about the fact that the so-called standard repertoire has increased tremendously and we've seen worldwide but particularly at the Met a big explosion in the repertoire that we do in all directions." As an example he pointed to the Met's present season, with its blend of works like *Aida, Bohème,* and *Tosca* and "unusual" works—titles unspecified—which

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were attracting an ever-increasing public. To Newman's question about whether contemporary works—he mentioned Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*—influenced the way traditional works are performed, Levine invoked the "human artistic continuum," the "human community," and "the prismatic many-faceted work of art [such] as any of these." The real content of his answer seemed to be that there would be all kinds of productions from old-fashioned to outlandish and new. Newman asked for examples of styles that had worked well, and some that hadn't; Levine answered that the old-fashioned, realistic production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* had worked very well, but that other attempts—again unspecified—had not. Conversely, some modern productions had managed to be new without violating the spirit of the works, while others had flunked. Once again, no examples were given.

Newman at last moved the discussion forward by asking Levine what he would put in his "state of the union" message to the Met's public. Levine immediately seized the high road of blather. "The visions," he said,

> I have for art, for opera, for the Met, are always in a state of getting better . . . I'm very fulfilled that here we have this incredible, unique company, the largest collection of great artists under one roof in the world, performing with incredible dedication, at an unbelievable standard, and yet, as we roll up our sleeves and work on it, I can always see that we can make it better here, we can make it better there . . . as the Met goes into its second century, that what with the tremendous explosion of repertoire, what with the great number of new artists that come along who are, with voices, with an idea of style, with linguistic ability, with a brand-new demand, a much greater demand, for visual values than used to be the norm, and of course for visual values but not at the expense of good singing, which is again one of these balances we're talking about, I think we have every reason to imagine that whereas there was a time ten years ago or so where a lot of us worried that this art form might become something like a museum in the bad sense, it is becoming a museum in the good sense, a place where one can see the great works of art but it also is developing a whole new profound, powerful vitality . . . .

After suggesting that he wanted to see the Met have a smaller performance space for new and less grand works, Levine was asked how he explained the expansion of the public for new repertory. He found the cause in the increased exposure of the public to such media as the movies and television. Finally, to Newman's question about how he chose works for television, Levine again talked about diversity, and the need to have the old and the new. Levine's mention of the new, I might add, went no further than *Lulu* (1928-1934) and the Weill-Brecht *Mahagonny* (1930). The interview thus concluded with the triumph of obfuscation complete; not a word—not one—had been said about prospective new works for the Met's hidebound repertory or about the lack of conductors to bring musical leadership to the Met's performances.

By the final intermission one felt fortunate indeed that Verdi had provided *Aida* with no more than four acts. Arianna Stassinopolous's first words hit the requisite note of romantic flummery: "For me," she intoned, "Egypt is the land of the unconscious, of timeless mysteries." "Like Egypt itself," she continued,

> the Egypt of *Aida* is open to many interpretations. Is it bright, or is it dark? Is it barbaric or is it civilized? And when did *Aida* take place? After all, the history of Egypt runs for over four thousand years. And what was Egyptian civilization like? And how do you portray it onstage?

The way was now clear for Peter Hall and David Reppa. They made clear that their task as costume and set designers wasn't in any way a scholarly re-creation of ancient Egypt. It was rather a setting of a nineteenth-century opera, with the inspiration for the setting drawn from the music and from the audience's image of Egypt, which in turn

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derived from the appearances of such Egyptian role-players as Elizabeth Taylor and Claudette Colbert. The last words belonged to Stassinopoulos: "However you choose to interpret this grandest of operas, the Egypt of *Aida* will always remain a mystery, an enigma."

And so to positively the last intermission feature, the Francis Robinson travelogue. Here, for all its sentimental evocation of the simple, noble life of Verdi and his heirs as farmers and landowners, was a reversion to a time-honored way of educating people about art: show them some pictures illustrative of the context in which the artwork was produced, tell them some facts about the creator and his creation. The pictures of Verdi's house and estate showed real things, and the stories of Verdi's behavior with his family and tenants, for all its severity, illustrated the world of real people—and even of artists—in a way woolly abstractions about mysteries and enigmas, human artistic continuums, and incredible unique companies can never manage. And one story Robinson told—about Verdi's leaving the dinner table to write down some notes a child in a high-chair had just been singing, and about the perfect silence which then reigned until the composer returned—said more about the unvarnished behavior of the artist at work than a million foolishnesses about concentration, commitment, and sacred ego could ever manage to express.

The ultimate verdict on this telecast of *Aida* must be that it failed on all three counts: it was not a proper farewell tribute to a famous American singer; it did not convey an authentic performance of Verdi's opera; and, last of all, it not only lost a marvelous opportunity to teach a large public about art but actually placed in the mind of this public a false idea of what the operatic art actually is.

The most immediate and personally distressing shortcoming of the evening, of course, was the failure of the presentation to pay proper homage to Leontyne Price on her operatic farewell. Miss Price may well be the most important soprano America has produced; the fact that she is black represented an external handicap that she long ago surmounted and even transcended. Though she is renowned as a Verdi singer, it is difficult not to think that her greatest and most lasting achievement was her leading role in the first performance of Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* at the opening of the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center in 1966. While fate has not as yet been kind to this work,[1] the difficult circumstances of its birth cannot efface the memory of Miss Price's beautiful singing at the première (still to be heard on the pirate tapes made from the radio broadcast of the first performance). Two arias from the work—scandalously all that Miss Price recorded of the score—can be heard in her splendid performance on disc made at the end of the 1960s in England with the New Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Thomas Schippers.[2] A much earlier memento not just of what Miss Price was, but more poignantly of what she might have been had there been a viable body of American opera written in the 1960s and 1970s for her to sing, can be found in a 1954 recording of Barber's *Hermit Songs* with the composer at the piano.[3] Here the fresh young voice, the easy technique, and the beautiful diction

1 It remains to be seen whether the recent recording of this enormous work—its first—at the Spoleto Festival (New World Records 322/3/4) will help to bring *Antony* into the repertory. It is my own impression that the work will only be fully appreciated when it receives a performance at the highest international level of singing, production, orchestral playing, and, it goes without saying, conducting. Until then, the Spoleto recording can nobly serve to demonstrate the magnificence of the music the score contains.

2 This recording, which also contains Price's touching singing of Barber's *Knoxville; Summer of 1915* is available on RCA AGL1-5221; one of the arias from *Antony* is also available on "Opening Nights at the New Met," RCA ARL1-4856.

3 This recording is still available on CBS Odyssey 32 16 0230. Hurry.

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speak volumes about what an American singer singing the best American music can achieve. Of all this there was nothing in the Met telecast, either in the choice of repertory or in the intermission features. Instead Miss Price, herself hardly in the best condition to argue her case, was given an inferior supporting cast, a perverse production, and a routine orchestral performance. The intermission features concentrating on show-business frippery, ignored Miss Price completely.

Beyond the issue of the tribute due Miss Price lies the problem of the *Aida* telecast performance as a whole. Rather than the company demonstrating its mastery in a central area of the operatic repertory, it demonstrated an unsureness and a lack of distinction which must surely be troubling to the Met's many boosters, paid and unpaid. No part of the performance was above the level of the merely acceptable; no part seemed either outstanding or worthy of an international opera house on a gala night. Most disturbing was the lack of style—*any* kind of style. There was (Fiorenza Cossotto aside) no palpable Italian style in evidence, either in the singing or in the musical direction, unless by Italian is meant an atmosphere of square harmonies and cheap melodies; when an attempt was made to be "musical," the result was both artificial and ultimately uninteresting. There was no American style either, if by American is meant the best of what the New York City Opera in another time and under other leadership might be able to accomplish: the young and vital communication of suitable foreign masterworks in English, thus enabling an unsophisticated audience to understand the action without the dreadful present practice of subtitles in both television and live performances.

And then there was the greatest failure of all: the muffed opportunity to educate the audience. Here, finally, is the ultimate justification of public television, of the tax deduction for artistic institutions, for the privileged status of art and artists in a democratic society. Beyond entertainment, beyond pleasure no matter how elevated, and certainly beyond the commerce of show business, lies the world of culture and civilization, and the possibility of a free citizenry to become participant members of a world which they may not have been born to but have earned. It is the desire to come into this inheritance, whether in the acquisition of the skills of ordinary literacy or in the comprehension of the greatest works of culture, that underlies the current popular interest in education and the popular reaction against the crimes which supposedly professional educators have committed in the name of education. For the Met to think it could get away with the "marketing" of such an inferior product as the *Aida* telecast is merely another sign of the contempt in which those responsible for a refined culture hold the audience to which they pay every kind of lip service—and which they passionately hope to milk financially.

It will doubtless be said that it is both unfair and even ridiculous to hold the Metropolitan Opera so rigorously to account for what was after all only a single evening's event. The answer to this complaisant argument has two parts: bad work should be identified and described, and in the days of video cassette recorders nothing broadcast over the airwaves is ephemeral. Indeed, these days, the survival of garbage is assured; the problem is the survival of culture.

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Art

Caravaggio and all the others

by Creighton Gilbert

The Metropolitan Museum's exhibition "The Age of Caravaggio" shows one phase, and just a little of another, of one of the most special artists who ever lived.[1] In important ways his painting is forcefully unlike what our eyes are offered in painting familiar to us, whether of our own time or of the other cultures that filter to us in quantity. He lets us know, too, that he had an unhesitating assurance as to his authority; he clearly felt that what he was saying was true and very important, and that he was completely able to say it. To be sure, the exhibition does not show the works of Caravaggio that do this in the fullest way, being almost entirely limited to the smaller canvases that are allowed to travel to loan shows. It is as if we were confronted with Joyce only through the stories in *Dubliners.* But that does not mean it can be missed.

Yet it is a help to notice from the start what sort of exhibition this is not, especially since the context might set up different expectations. It is not like the supershows that have become a fixture of the Metropolitan. Instead, its style of selection exemplifies the way Italian scholars make big exhibitions of their Old Masters. Of course it would, since in the international collaboration that prepared the show Italian scholars played a primary role, but even people who know this might not draw the inferences that would prepare them for what they get. The meaning given to the word "age" is a major example. A show with that word in the title would usually be expected to include at least the artists who came most directly under the spell of the hero, and who then produced their own mutations through their own evolving careers in various places. The work of such painters, seen together, would certainly add up to a nice and a standard definition of a Caravaggesque age. It would include not only his direct successors, but works done at critical moments by younger great painters, notably Rubens and Velázquez, who turned him into something else while willingly exposing the same kind of basic debt as the Cubists showed to the landscapist Cézanne.

In this show, instead, the Age of Caravaggio stops cold in the year he died. There are two very early Rubenses, from his visit to Italy, but the claim that these already reflect Caravaggio seems stretched. What these paintings can do, along with those of other artists active during Caravaggio's short working career, around 1592-1610, is to set up for the more sophisticated visitor the very involved crosscurrents of that moment

1 "The Age of Caravaggio" is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from February 9 to April 14. The exhibition was organized for the Metropolitan by Sir John Pope-Hennessy, consultative chairman of the Department of European Paintings, and Keith Christiansen, associate curator of European Paintings. *The Age of Caravaggio,* the exhibition's catalogue, was published by the Metropolitan Museum; 352 pages, $25.

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in Rome and nearby. This period was at least as variable as any two recent decades in New York, though we may not be aware of it since our long perspective on the past tends to drop out the uninfluential.

The diverging attitudes of the time—the talents with varying stylistic and ideological bases—mark two big rooms that precede the five galleries containing the Caravaggios. The two rooms are preceded in turn by three others showing works of artists in earlier generations, from around 1525, who have been argued to be the ancestors that even the boldest pioneer, like Caravaggio, must have. While some scholars have made claims for these painters, other painters, claimed as ancestors by other writers, are not presented. The simplest token that all this is arranged around scholars' interest appears in the introduction to the catalogue, where it is explained why Caravaggio's followers are not being shown. The first reason is that this had been done already in other shows, in Milan in 1951 and in other European cities since. That is certainly a logical reason for art historians who saw those shows or have studied the catalogues, but hardly for the visitors that the Metropolitan envisages when showing, say, Van Gogh, when previous familiarity is precisely the best reason for the project.

The second reason given in the catalogue is that the followers, being later, would not help us understand Caravaggio's evolution. So the evolution is what we are to learn here, and we do. So the exhibition style helps the specialist. It does so in more obvious ways, such as the inclusion of numerous recently attributed works, previously known only from reproductions in the scholarly journals and now testable against the others, or that of two duplicate paintings from different permanent collections, each with a claim to be Caravaggio's original. Will one win, or are both copies? Caravaggio was copied a great deal. Unless one is prepared to do these interesting exercises, one cannot get through to the basic image of what Caravaggio is from this display. The show contains twenty-three of these uncertain Caravaggios, either fresh discoveries or paintings that have been argued over for a longer time; by contrast, it includes just sixteen unquestioned ones. (The catalogue shows eighteen, two having been held back by the owners at the last minute.) The other sixty paintings exhibited are by the predecessors and contemporaries.

In Italy such patterns are standard, even when a big exhibition has been given a large grant on grounds that it will assist the tourist industry. The industry actually is helped, for the public accepts the idea that what the professors tell them is right to know. Other professors, who have not been involved in the show, write newspaper comments on it. There is no feeling that the public must be given mostly such elementary items as "who was David in the Bible." If we fantasized an Italian educator confronting an American gallery tour, with its leader, we might imagine him experiencing the kind of shock often felt by book authors when they go on talk shows. Happy to be invited, ready to discuss the concepts in their book, they find a host who hasn't dreamed of reading it, and would like to use the allocated ninety seconds for anecdotes about the author's experiences in getting it written.

In an article in *The New York Times Magazine,* strongly committed to Caravaggio, Frank Stella expressed the wish that two great Rubenses (painted somewhat later than those in the exhibition) had been added at the end to show how Rubens used Caravaggio. "For most of us," Stella remarked, "great painting is the great painting of the 17th century—Rubens, Velázquez, and Rembrandt." And Caravaggio got all of them going. Manet might have spoken similarly, about the later three though not about Caravaggio; Caravaggio's priority was then accepted, but not his equal quality. Did Stella not notice that when the exhibition-goer is extruded at the end of the show into the ordinary Metropolitan galleries he is sent into a room dominated by wonderful Rubenses? This may have been because, when we do see the two artists side by side, the likeness isn't strong in a literal optical

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way; rather there is a similarity in conceptual principles. But the likeness might well be more critical to Stella, whose image of Caravaggio is not conventional. He finds in him an action painter who "makes the act of making a picture so real that the paint appears fresh," who "communicates the anxiety and urgency inherent in the mechanics of pictorial expression." More concretely, Caravaggio is a creator of pictorial space "able to support the development of painting for 300 years," and the absence of his space from the abstraction being produced now is a sad decline. Moreover, his space was new; artists before him in the Renaissance had perfected the figure, with increased volume, but their space was not "elastic and flexible."

I think what Stella is referring to in Caravaggio's space creation—to judge from the examples he lists—is the way his figures stretch their limbs through it. It has to be a figure-generated space, for Caravaggio remains an artist devoted to the human figure as sole hero (he painted one still life). In this he is like his Renaissance predecessors in a way that Rembrandt and Velázquez maintained only some of the time. It is attractive to see Stella, from his earned place as avant-garde tastemaker, step forth to write us a letter of recommendation about Caravaggio. What we learn is that for him Caravaggio is a great fellow artist, and therefore did what Stella expects artists to do (the action-painting factor). We also learn of the space-creation problem that preoccupies Stella in current painting, and the natural inference that a great painter would help. But I don't think we should then follow Stella in his very understandable feeling that this space was near the heart of Caravaggio's interests or achievements. Much less could I agree when Stella becomes an art historian and says Caravaggio was the *first* to move out from figure-volume to space-construction. For one thing, art history knows that it is shaky to assert firstness where we know there is a lot we don't know about an epoch. But more, when the Renaissance is described as working effectively with the volume of the figure, and not much with space, I see a conventional definition of that period which means only Florence, the locus of Leonardo and Michelangelo. Despite references to Venice, and despite the show's assemblage of north Italian painters (fairly weak, except for the wall of three Savoldos), Stella has perhaps not been looking at painters like Correggio—probably the least accessible to our eyes of all great Italian artists—or Correggio's ancestor, Mantegna, an artist who does mean a lot to other painters today. In Mantegna, space-stretching is an intense concern, one with which he was perhaps even too systematically involved. It shows not only in the pushing limbs (his famous *Dead Christ* was copied in a picture in this show, by Annibale Carracci) but in pure landscape passages that push out the sides of the picture space, or skies that push behind the back of the space as it is defined by the forms and perspective.

But Caravaggio did set the stage for the painting of the next three hundred years. He is a very rare case—the only other undeniable ones are Giotto, Jacques-Louis David, and Picasso as a Cubist—of so drastic an overhaul where the tool is a (seeming) utter simplification of vision. It conveys a sense of conviction, against the alleged overelaboration of received tradition. Once accepted, the new style of course starts at once to get complicated again. Such calls for reform are made, obviously, in the name of truth, which for Caravaggio as well as Giotto meant the look of the material world and its contents. So Caravaggio has always been tagged as a naturalist, which is not wrong, only crudely simplified. One of the problems to be faced was the relation to the great Renaissance masters like Michelangelo, who were part of the rejected past but also so admired that it was always good to copy them. Several Caravaggios, including the *Victorious Love* in the exhibition, have rightly been called "travesties" of Michelangelo, the kind of combination of joky satire, updating, and homage that Picasso applied to Velázquez. But in the exhibition the most fascinating token of

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this difficulty is a quite peculiar painting by Annibale Carracci.

It is the rather unsure work of a twenty-two-year-old who has had a bad press because his later work has become the most cited instance of academicism (which revisionist art historians have been arguing against). So it is not likely to draw much notice, except from scholars glad to see the original, ordinarily little viewed in the number-two art gallery in Oxford. What is the point of this six-by-nine-foot picture of butchers in a shop? Art historians correctly doing their thing have remarked that, contrary to what one might think, there had been earlier pictures of very similar subjects on this scale. However, the instances they offer turn out to be mainly still lifes of food at markets, with the people seen only to one side; if the people are positioned at center stage, they are shown only in half length, seated in a stable way. That is not the same as Annibale's arrangement of full-length, life-sized men involved in twisting gestures as they work. A further correct observation has been that their poses in most cases imitate those in two paintings by Raphael and Michelangelo (the latter on the Sistine Ceiling) both of the same subject, Noah and his family thanking God for being saved from the flood, by sacrificing a sheep. But scholars have called this citation "surprising," or even found it not interesting to discuss, and in any case have worked out their reasons for the existence of the picture in isolation from that factor. But it would surely seem significant that Annibale's subject is the same very specific kind of activity of animal killing, only with the high tone of religious ritual and Biblical text stripped away and the people put in modern clothes and in a recognizable, even commonplace, situation. The composition that the masters had worked out is, after all, a bunch of guys at a shop counter. That looks like a bold young man's manifesto, fortissimo. It does not seem likely that someone commissioned this particular very large image from a beginner who was without reputation and who possessed only limited skill.

Since Caravaggio's big pictures maintain the factor of religious illustration, their naturalism has always been seen as even more of a problem. Where Carracci split his work between traditional, classy, commissioned images and pure low-life diversions (seen mainly in his work for engravings and caricature drawings), Caravaggio insisted on a single procedure. When, in the nineteenth century, Burckhardt developed his influential formula that the modernizing, this-worldly Renaissance overthrew medieval superstition, it was easy to think of a Caravaggio who had helped this process along. This is part of the Caravaggio shock, when we see the Virgin Mary painted as an ordinary woman, along with the shocking dark-light confrontations and thrusting gestures. Caravaggio's conservative contemporaries registered it and were upset. But today we generally think Caravaggio was expressing a more honest religious tribute than those who distanced the saints into respectability.

How problematic that is may be more easily seen in a close Caravaggio imitator, who is like him in surface effects but perhaps not more. Orazio Gentileschi's *David* is a standing monumental near-nude. The catalogue, for well-argued reasons, thinks the artist revised it, and accepts that now the point seems a bit unfocused. The profile pose is arranged with an elbow leaning on a bent leg. The skin is naturalistic in Caravaggio's way, but the background is academically vague and formulaic. The real figure without real action or real space inevitably evokes our awareness of the model: the youth is posing in a contrived posture in the studio. Since he is made a real person, we can place him as a chorus boy, the sort seen in television movies full of good-looking young people who are not made to do much acting; what they express is the luck of their ability to get an enviable job. Guido Reni's *David* in the show is the same, even though this artist, as a pupil of Carracci, belonged to a different group with less revolutionary attitudes, a group not tied to naturalism. His figure, with crossed legs, fur throw, and

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crazy feathered red hat, is true to his life as a person posing, and Goliath's head is only the prop that has been handed him in the undefined studio space.

It's a matter of talent. Annibale's less famous older cousin and mentor Ludovico Carracci, particularly well presented in the show, had no difficulty with the most peculiar religious legends he was assigned (a saint martyred by an arrow while tied to the top of a tree trunk; another, in a seven-foot-wide canvas, being thrown into a very large sewer). He could make paintings of them work with unity of form and on a single level of reality. These were the real myths of his culture and he could recount them. I think a lot of his success has to do with his handling of light, forever shifting over his forms but always consistent.

Caravaggio's Davids, and his other religious pictures, also make sense of the story. He takes the same models as Gentileschi and Reni but makes them be the David of the narrative, a hero who is still significant. It might be effective to think of Caravaggio as an auteur, the artist whose materials are actual people, not visually changed from their preceding state, but with their personalities suppressed in favor of his story. Caravaggio's blacks and whites also seem to foretell photography; the effect of truth and simplicity evoked from such minimal polarities may have been what he found good in them, as perhaps some of the great photographers have leaned on the same power. Today photographs have an advantage over painting in that viewers believe they bespeak someone's statement about what exists out there; they do not require us to find an artist's internal voice worth our attention. Before photography, most painting sought this effect, often urgently, and Caravaggio was one of those who succeeded most directly. But if his dark and light has a photographic absoluteness, his drama builds from that toward something more like a movie. When Buñuel made his actors, in the roles of beggars, pose like Leonardo's *Last Supper,* he was aiming for something very like Annibale Carracci's butcher shop. Caravaggio's arrangements of people sometimes include quotations, but they primarily work directly from the people as materials to the statement, where the fusion of realness and the simplest design has the convincingness of a proverb.

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Theater

Semi-detached theater

by Mimi Kramer

It's been what they politely term a "thin" season on Broadway this year, a season far more memorable for its lows than for its highs. When set against the middlebrow melodrama of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and the sleepy bromides of Whoopi Goldberg's white comedy, the breathtaking stupidity of some of the season's more ill-fated offerings seemed unforgettable indeed.

Kicking off the season at the Music Box Theatre was *Alone Together,* a play about a middle-aged couple's inability to rid their tasteful suburban house of a passel of grown-up children. Bred in the Theater of Empathy tradition, whose purpose is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Topical Anxiety, *Alone Together* gave the audience a chance to see itself in the same old light the bedside table lamp has shed on all those eiderdown conversations about "where we went wrong, dear." What tears of relief must have sprung to the eyes of countless middle-aged fathers on hearing Kevin McCarthy declare with debonair solidity, "We were fantastic parents: loving, giving and wise!" What thunder of applause from countless weary mothers on Janis Paige's haunting cry: "The mother machine is all worn down!" (How skillfully she drew out those spondees!) Easily the most exploitive play in recent seasons, *Alone Together* was the sort of show that even Frank Rich couldn't kill overnight—suggesting that where countless upper-middle-class parents "went wrong" was in having nothing more important to think about than their children, even at the theater.

November brought to the Broadway Theater the now legendary *Three Musketeers,* remarkable chiefly because it blazed new trails in human vulgarity and gave unprecedented publicity to the performance of a horse. Subsequently, at the Ritz Theater, producer Morton Gottlieb and author Bill C. Davis made great strides toward reviving the wheelchair play in *Dancing in the End Zone,* a work that explored the sociological implications of college football. A play about a journalism student's attempts to influence the quarterback whom she is meant to be coaching in college English, *Dancing in the End Zone* turned the *Good News* plot on its head with lines like "Sometimes I think if all you guys got together to plant broccoli and zucchini in the football field, it would do more for world peace . . . ." Talk about a varsity drag!

But now the time of year has come around again when Broadway seems to turn its back on homegrown folly: the marquee lights grow dim on all the silly American plays the season has produced and up they come on all the silly plays from London. They come, the London sillies, like the swallows—usually as the last snows of winter are cascading down the gutters and subway gratings of Manhattan. This year, though, the winter snows came late out of the West and the sillies from across the sea came early: James Duff's *The Home Front,* which opened at

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the Royale Theatre in early January, Michael Hasting's *Tom and Viv,* which came to the Public Theatre in February, and Hugh Whitemore's *Pack of Lies,* which followed *The Home Front* into the Royale that same month.

One forgets, of course, exactly what the first gust of spring is like although one has tasted it year after year; just so with London theater. Year after year one has breathed its balmy essence and yet one forgets, with seasonal resilience, just how deadly serious the London sillies always are. *The Home Front,* an American creation whose producers had seen fit to try it out at the Hampstead Theatre Club in London under another name, traced a young man's inability to be courteous to his mother and dress for dinner to the causes of the war in Vietnam. *Pack of Lies,* last season's highbrow hit in the West End, a play depicting the moral and emotional breakdown of a woman who allows the British secret service into her house to spy on friends across the way, forced us to re-evaluate the Nosey Neighbor figure in literature and history.

Tom and Viv, which dazzled London audiences last season at the Royal Court (the theater on the cutting edge of Belgravia), is a play about the private life of T. S. Eliot. In New York it seems to serve the same function that a play like *The Home Front* might have served twenty years ago: it enables the members of an audience to feel superior to their parents. It also enables them to feel close to literature while assuring them that a play *about* T. S. Eliot is as close to his poetry as one needs to get, especially considering the sort of fellow he turns out to be. The story told by *Tom and Viv* is a familiar one, the "Zelda" story: *she* really wrote all his poems, plays, stories, real-estate contracts (choose one); and he, by way of thanks, had her locked away in an asylum. It is interesting to speculate on how this story will resurface in the next generation. Perhaps since food is to the "Yuppie" generation what poetry was to its parents, we can expect to learn from a similar play at the Public Theatre in twenty years' time that, say, Joel Rebuchon really owed his third star to his wife, who later went mad whereupon he had her committed to a soup kitchen.

Pack of Lies was actually the most interesting play of the season and, with a flawless cast and graceful direction from Clifford Williams that elicited exquisite performances from Rosemary Harris, Dana Ivey, and Patrick McGoohan, it was easily the most impressive. The play, moreover, has been partially cut and rewritten so that it is somewhat less heavy-handed than it was in London. Its weakness still seems to be, however, Hugh Whitemore's fundamental confusion over the play he wants to write. What starts as an "intellectual" suspense story centering around the Forsterian choice between loyalty to friend or country becomes a muddled message about the harmfulness and hypocrisy of Western righteousness. The moral dilemma the play presents only remains a dilemma for as long as we either wonder whether Helen and Peter really *are* spies (what if they hadn't been? what then?) or for as long as we remain convinced that Bob and Barbara would care if they were. The minute that Whitemore asks us to feel, along with Barbara, that we don't care *what* Helen and Peter have done because they're their *friends,* pop goes the moral dilemma and there goes Whitemore's play. What Whitemore does not seem to realize is that you can write a play about innocent people whose lives are ruined by a wicked and unnecessary moral dilemma, and you can write a play whose message is that MI5 is every bit as rotten as the KGB. But you cannot write a play whose message is that MI5 is every bit as rotten as "our friends." It just doesn't make sense.

If the London imports seemed to boast a weightier, more sophisticated brand of subject matter than the American plays this winter, the quality of writing in the British and American plays can be said to have been about the same. In their literary weaknesses, in fact, this sampling of the best of last year's British theater rather resembled the worst of this year's New York season. *The Home Front,* for example, was a play that

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seemed to be less about ideas or people than about concepts in home decoration; in this it resembled nothing so much as *Alone Together*. Both plays belong to that rising school of dramaturgy that relies entirely on set design to establish character and conflict. There are no people in these plays—only houses. That George and Helene Butler have cacti growing in their kitchen windows and a Cuisinart machine, that they keep their firewood in a copper pail beside the hearth and like to grind their own coffee, that they hang the photos of the children on the second-floor landing and keep the walls below reserved for wrought-iron trivets and tasteful tapestries is all we really know about the couple in *Alone Together* and all we need to know. Just as all we really have to know about the family in *The Home Front* is that the pictures on their walls come from mail-order catalogues, that they have matching living-room furniture and half-empty bookcases and that the plaque over the serving hatch (for their kitchen has a serving hatch) proclaims with Bible-belt complacency, "We give thanks unto the Lord." Their thoughts, their feelings are unimportant for their salient characteristics are a wood-paneled living room and a set of *World Book* encyclopedias.

Dancing in the End Zone had probably been the season's biggest literary embarrassment, yet *Tom and Viv* and *Pack of Lies,* for all their literary aspirations, seemed to share certain of its underlying assumptions about the craft of playwrighting. What all three of these plays had in common was an ineffectual groping after some notion of theatricality in the form of pseudo-Brechtian stage devices that actually performed no other service to the play than to lend it a superficial aura of sophistication. *Dancing in the End Zone* made a great point of lacking a realistic set, for example. The characters in the play moved from one part of the stage to another (before an indescribably repulsive abstract structure), changing place and time with their position. But there was no reason for this device to have been used in this particular play. It served no dramatic purpose or thematic function. It served no purpose at all beyond allowing Bill Davis to move the action of his play to a variety of different places without requiring Morton Gottlieb to provide sets for them. Thus, though the device had no artistic justification, it gave the work a semblance of sophistication and at the same time saved Mr. Gottlieb a great deal of money.

Whatever deleterious effects the movie industry may be said to have had on theater in America (and these are so numerous as to be the subject of another essay), the emergence of film as the most profitable mode of dramatization did have one very important and beneficial effect. It gave the theater a reason for taking stock of its own artistic capabilities because it robbed certain kinds of dramatic material of the justification for their existing as plays. Before movies, the stage had been the proper medium for any story one could hope to dramatize, being the only one there was. But the advent of cinema made it artistically uneconomical to present certain subjects in the form of a play because they could be just as, if not more, easily presented through film. When modern drama began to take account of the implications of film and of the problems that it might predictably pose for theater, its "serious" proponents tended to fall roughly into two groups. The less visionary playwrights tried to justify their medium with the theory of "social realism" which, in the context of theater, was surely one of modern literary man's dumber ideas. But the real artists and theoreticians, like Brecht—and, even earlier, Pirandello—looked to the form of theater itself for an internal rather than external justification and made discoveries about what theater could do that film was and always would be incapable of achieving. And, of course, what they discovered was nonrealism.

Unhappily, the world is full of people who are not really playwrights in terms of calling or artistic motivation, but who persist in writing plays because—for a variety of good and bad reasons—they want to. Now, it hap-

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pens that the legacy of modern dramaturgy allows the third-rate playwright to bail out by means of nonrealistic devices that work by covering up failures of imagination with an appearance of artistry. Such devices are not always the product of fashion or mediocrity, though. In the hands of a good playwright they can be tremendously effective; indeed, when enlisted in the service of an artistic idea, such devices are probably the best thing that our theater—as distinct from the theater of previous ages—has to offer.

Peter Nichols is one such playwright and *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg,* which the Roundabout Theatre revived this winter in a production that transfers to Broadway in the spring, is a play that uses nonrealistic staging and literary devices for a purpose, in order to achieve a series of effects. Breaking the conventions of realism, the play openly acknowledges the presence of the audience. It opens with a scene that establishes the hero's profession by turning the theater into a schoolroom and the audience into a riot of noisy children.

Before the houselights have even dimmed and while members of the audience are still chattering and settling in their seats, a man comes out onstage and shouts at them. "That's enough!" he bellows. Naturally there is instant silence. A few titters escape from various corners of the darkness. "I said, that's ENOUGH!" the actor bellows again at the top of his voice. "Another word and you'll all be here till five o'clock!" The joke continues for five or ten minutes while the actor harangues the audience, threatening them ("Next one to groan stands on the seat"), manipulating them ("Now try to hold it just like that till I get to this machine-gun over here . . . My fault, all right. Little joke. No more laughing."), and humiliating them ("Right—hands on heads! Come on, that includes you, put the comb away. Eyes front and sit up. All of you sit up!"). The precise ways in which the joke accurately tracks the characteristic feelings and behavior of an audience at the theater makes the audience self-conscious. But the scene also suggests a number of things about the pro-

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cess by which adults, in managing normal, healthy children, have to infantilize *themselves* as well as their charges and suggests something, too, about the hero's personality in the duck-to-water manner in which he takes to this infantalizing process.

The couple in Peter Nichols's play, Bri and Sheila, have a ten-year-old daughter who is severely brain damaged. Rather than institutionalize her, they choose to keep her at home and they manage to get through their days with the child by treating themselves and one another like children. One half of the play—the half that follows Bri and Sheila from the ending of one school day to the dawn of the next—takes place on a conventional "fourth-wall" level of reality. Large sections of the play, however, break down the barriers of realism and take the form of a peculiar pageant in which Bri and Sheila vie with one another to share their daughter's history with the audience. They talk to us constantly: they talk to us in unison, they talk to us in counterpoint, they talk to us alone. Sheila, left alone onstage for a moment, takes the opportunity to confide some of her views about Bri. "What are you telling them?" Bri asks jealously, coming back into the room. Together, Bri and Sheila act out little scenes for us: the scene at the hospital, the scene with the GP, the scene with the specialist or the vicar. There is even an "ad lib" joke written into the script: "You've never put that in before," says Bri, stepping out of character, and we know that this pageant is a ritual that Bri and Sheila have gone through hundreds of times before with hundreds of other strangers.

On one level, of course, the ritual is the play we have come to see; on another level, though, it is a figurative expression of Bri and Sheila's pathology. For these are people who thrive on black-comedy clowning and playacting. It isn't just their way of putting a bold face on things, it's a way of life. They act out plays for each other and for their guests as well as for us—horrible, sadistic plays that make everyone feel uncomfortable and punish everyone for being happier or more fortunate than they are: pretending or pretending to believe that one of them has killed the child or that the other is suspected of adultery. And until Nichols grafts on an unrealistic ending (you know this man would never leave his wife and autistic child because he revels in the bright hell that he inhabits!), the play is a brilliant exploration of the relationship that the opening scene established; actor and audience, sadist and masochist. But the primary thing that enables us to sit through the play—given the grimness of its subject matter—is the emotional and psychological distancing effected by those nonrealistic devices that constantly remind us it is only a play.[1]

The nonrealistic monologues in *Joe Egg* have a function that no other dramatic device could perform: they enable us to listen to what the characters are saying. By contrast, the nonrealistic monologues in *Pack of Lies* and *Tom and Viv* (of which there are many) are purely mechanical: they enable the playwright to establish facts about a character's state of mind or situation that might have been more subtly and more affectingly depicted through drama. Thus, the pharmacist who handles Mrs. Eliot's medications in *Tom and Viv* has to come out and *tell* the audience what her feelings toward Viv were, as though the playwright was unable to demonstrate that relationship through dialogue and action.

Similarly, *Pack of Lies* opens with Bob Jackson standing in a spotlight and speaking directly to the audience. "I was in the garden," he begins, "when I heard the doorbell. It was a Saturday afternoon." The speech turns out to be a little anecdote, a

1 Unfortunately, in the current production an excessively realistic and obtrusive set completely dismantles the distancing mechanism in *Joe Egg* so that large portions of the Roundabout production were, in fact, very hard to sit through. Thus, in spite of some very fine acting from Stockard Channing, Joanne Gleason, and Gary Waldhorn, too often the play seemed to scrape by on burlesque rather than balance.

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memory about being approached one day by a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses who offered Bob "the key to happiness." According to Bob's story, he thanked the pamphleteers very much and told them that he was perfectly happy already. "Later on," the speech ends,

> when I was back in the garden, I said to myself, "Well, it's true—I am happy—it's true." And for a moment I stood there, grinning from ear to ear, just because I felt happy for no particular reason. *(He grins.)* It was marvellous.

It must have been, but a better dramatist might have been able to establish that the Jacksons were perfectly happy before the advent of the man from MI5 during the first scene in which we actually *saw* them before the advent of the man from MI5.

There is a mild irony at work here. The Brechtian stage devices in *Tom and Viv* and *Pack of Lies* make it seem for a moment as though these plays are stageworthy, as though they would *have* to be plays, in fact. Actually, unlike the nonrealistic devices in *Joe Egg,* none of them has any organic reason for being there. If, for instance, you tried to make a movie of *Pack of Lies* or *Tom and Viv,* you would have to remove the monologues. But if you did, there would be no harm done, for there is nothing the monologues establish that couldn't be better depicted through the narrative and cinematic devices at film's disposal. But when, in the early Seventies, a film version of *Joe Egg* was made with Alan Bates and Janet Suzman, the result was a complete disaster, as any film version would have been.

What I-was-in-the-garden playwrighting covers up, in the case of plays like *Tom and Viv* and *Pack of Lies,* is the fact that both of these plays would probably be much better off as movies. Both deal with material that is essentially undramatic and untheatrical, material that could be far more subtly and complexly explored through the medium of film. Both these plays' most fundamental weaknesses derive from the nature of theater

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itself, limitations which make it awkward or impossible for Hugh Whitemore and Michael Hastings to establish the things we really need or most want to know. This circumstance reached, perhaps, the very nadir of its absurdity in *Tom and Viv* (a play that spans thirty-two years), where characters had to keep coming out and announcing to the audience the year in which the following scene took place—just like that shot in 1930s movies of the wind blowing pages off a calendar.

Both *Tom and Viv* and *Pack of Lies* are about people who behave in an extraordinary fashion. And we want to know why. We want to know why Tom Eliot treats the wife the way he does; we want to know why Viv Eliot pours melted chocolate through the letter box; we want to know why Helen and Peter Kroger are spies and why Bob and Barbara Jackson allow the British secret service to commandeer their house and turn theirs into a life of duplicity and deception. But these are narrative, not dramatic, questions that theater cannot best explore because they have to do with ambivalence and the complexities of human motivation. They necessitate being allowed to enter a character's mind and becoming privy to what he thinks and feels as well as how he acts and what he says. Hugh Whitemore cannot take us into the Krogers' house across the street and show us what Helen and Peter are like at home; he cannot demonstrate the many years of intimacy and friendship that everyone keeps *saying* exist between the two families; he cannot take us back in time and share some insight with us into how two rather ordinary-seeming Americans came to take up service with the KGB. What ideals, what convictions or illusions did they have and how do they feel about them now? How do they *feel* about deceiving Bob and Barbara? The exigencies of Ralph Koltoi's single set—which looks like an architectural "elevation"-type blueprint of Bob and Barbara's semi-detached house—prevents Whitemore from answering any of these questions. Consequently, his play becomes simplistic and we the audience have to make do with a pair of villain-victims we do not understand, a friendship we cannot believe in, and a hackneyed story about blundering into a Party meeting one cold and hungry night during the Depression. It doesn't really cut the mustard.

Why *do* the Jacksons let the British secret service commandeer their house? In order to understand how implausible the play appears to Broadway audiences you have to know something about the plot. For what happens in *Pack of Lies* is *not* that a civil servant knocks on the Jacksons' front door one day saying, "Look here, your friends across the street, the Krogers, are Russian spies. Now: will you help us by letting us station agents in your upstairs bedroom for purposes of surveillance or not?" What happens in *Pack of Lies* is that the Jacksons are *tricked* into co-operating with the British secret service. In other words (and none of the reviews pointed this out) the Jacksons don't know that their friends are the people MI5 is looking for. When they discover that Helen and Peter are suspected of espionage, they are naturally incredulous and very upset.

MI5 wants to know what Gordon Lonsdale, whom they know to be a Russian agent, is doing coming out of the Krogers' house. Why don't you go across the street and ask them, Bob and Barbara suggest. He's probably just a casual friend. Helen and Peter can't be spies: we *know* them. The man from MI5 requests permission to remain stationed in the house and then a long scene occurs in which Bob and Barbara very adamantly refuse. You can't ask that of us, they protest: these people are our best friends; they pop round here all the time. You can't expect us to go on as if nothing had happened and sip tea with them downstairs, knowing that you are spying on them from upstairs! Finally, the man from MI5 says something like, "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I must insist." And that's the end of it. The MI5 agents remain in the house and pretty soon poor Barbara is throwing up in the kitchen sink when Helen comes round and generally falling to pieces. But the Jacksons put up with it.

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Make no mistake; the weaknesses of *Pack of Lies* did not prevent me from being gripped by the play and deeply involved in the situation it presents. Twice: I saw the play in London and New York, and both times I remember having tears in my throat at the first-act curtain—one of those rare, old-fashioned curtains that fall on a situation rather than on a line. It wasn't until the second act that Whitemore lost me and until I was outside the theater that the whole story began to seem implausible. It's no good pointing out that the whole thing really happened: that Helen and Peter Kroger really existed, that they were associates of the Rosenbergs who for years transmitted British naval secrets to Moscow from a London suburb, and that a family across the street who had been friendly with the Krogers were coerced into helping to effect the arrest. Of course it happened; implausible things *do* happen. The point is that we want to know why.

Why don't Bob and Barbara make a fuss? Why don't they simply present difficulties for the government agency: why doesn't Barbara give MI5 the keys to the house and go away for a few weeks to her mother's or even threaten to do so, which would give the game away, make the Krogers suspicious, and force MI5 out of the house? Hugh Whitemore's explanation is implied: Bob and Barbara are nice, simple, ordinary people who live in a semi-detached house and believe in Mother England. Which is, I think, primarily what that single set, the blueprint of the semi-detached house, is doing there.

Everyone in England knows these houses and the people who live in them. Built between the wars to house the lower-middle classes, semi-detached houses are rows of contiguous dwellings running down a street, all exactly alike and each sharing a party-wall with the next. I have lived in such houses: the damp sits in them like an angry and unavenged ghost and from kitchen and parlor doors waft the smells of years and years of stale cooking and stale memories and the closedness and stuffiness of lives in which there was not even enough room to elbow your dreams out of the way. I have lived in London's townhouses, too. Townhouses are also rows of contiguous dwellings running down a street and they also all look pretty much alike inside—Aga stove in the kitchen, kitchen in the basement, a loo on every other floor, and a good deal more carpeting than would be healthy in another climate. But townhouses are proud of belonging to their rows and making up the geometrical patterns of the street. They have flat-topped roofs and do not try to look unconnected, whereas semi-detached houses have gabled roofs and always look a bit as if they're trying to seem unconnected. It is characteristic of British social planning that when it came time for England to find some means of housing the lower-middle classes the design they came up with was one that proclaimed to the world, "We nice, simple, ordinary people are really ashamed of what we are."

The picture on the program cover for both the London and the New York productions of *Pack of Lies* showed a newspaper clipping. In the photograph was a row of semi-detached houses with an arrow pointing at one of them, as though to say, "Look! Here! This is where it all happened, but it could have been any one of them." Actually, though, the arrow is not pointing to a particular house in the photograph. Instead it is aimed at the lower left-hand corner of one of the gabled roofs, as though to point out that the house is semi-detached. For Hugh Whitemore, I think, the events depicted in *Pack of Lies* took place in a kind of mentality that the semi-detached house stands for: the Mrs. Miniver mentality, the queuing mentality, the "all-mucking-in together" and "doing-your-part-for-the-War-effort" mentality. But Whitemore, I think, associates this phenomenon with patriotism, nationalism, and cold-war paranoia. What an American audience can see, that Whitemore cannot, is that the Jacksons' behavior, their response to the situation, is a national rather than an ideological or class phenomenon: it is part of that fatal refusal to "make a fuss," to cause tiresome "unpleasantness" that has kept

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everything in England the same for over forty years—from the class system and the public school to "serious theater" and the bourgeois intellectual audience.

Had Whitemore been endowed with enough insight into human nature and the "British national character," he might have been able to produce a poignant statement, whether for stage or film, about a character trait that paradoxically leads as dangerously to moral compliance in peacetime as it does to moral courage in the crisis of war. He might have explored the poignant tension in the semi-detached house between lives where people try so hard to do what is expected of them and dreams that really just dry up, that don't explode or even die. But Whitemore is himself more a product of the society that produced the semi-detached house than a critic of it, and his play is more interested in striking attitudes than in exploring them. National self-criticism, like playwriting, is an activity in which playwrights like Hugh Whitemore are really only semi-engaged.

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Books

Avant-garde assortment

by David Paul

It was Baudelaire, I believe, who was the first to denounce the terms "avant-garde" and "revolutionary" as applied to the arts. They belonged to the world of politics and the military, and ought to stay there. It was only in the nineteenth century that they became current in the world of the arts, and in the twentieth that they became clichés. What they were attempting to describe had always been part of the process of history—and fashion: as long ago as Dante, the poet mentions the painter Cimabue as having recently been all the rage, but now "Giotto has the cry" ("ed ora ha Giotto il grido"). He speaks of this as no surprising thing, only a symptom of the endless revolution in human affairs and tastes. The history of art, and of painting in particular, is crammed with examples. Piero della Francesca, that monument of quattrocento classical purity, was old-fashioned as early as 1510 or so, when a roomful of his paintings was demolished to make way for the new wonder, Raphael. (How many of us would now rather have the Pieros, instead of the frescoes of the dizzily accomplished, divinely boring Raphael?)

It was in mid-career that Rembrandt sank out of fashion, and into bankruptcy. He was no longer interested in the startling, trompe l'oeil brilliance of his earlier portraits, and would-be patrons were not interested in what he now wanted to do. After his death, a major pundit of the day remarked of his work that he knew nothing of the "new clarity." He was simply a hanger-on of the cult of chiaroscuro which had begun before his time with Caravaggio. A much more obscure French provincial exponent of the Caravaggesque, one Georges de la Tour, would never have been rated worth a mention by the same pundit. He was a painter of little and local note in his own time. Three centuries had to elapse before his access to recognition and glory.

Bach too was a "has-been" in his own day, a virtuoso organist of incomparable brilliance, *but* a chapel composer and choirmaster, even though a contrapuntalist of incredible ingenuity and complexity. But fashion moving on had put counterpoint firmly in its place, relegated it to a limited, supportive role. The center of musical creativity had moved on, even in Bach's early career, from church music to opera, which he never touched. I remember reading somewhere that a contemporary dictionary of musicians and composers allotted a column to Bach and ten or more times as much to Handel, whom Bach longed to meet; he even walked twenty miles to a local town on the chance of seeing him, only to find the great Mr. Handel gone on his travels.

It seems that in any line of development in the arts, genius can occur late, or even at the very end of the line; and the later the comer the less will be his chances of recognition and success—fashion being a heartless thing. The genre of domestic interiors was nothing

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new in Dutch painting when Vermeer came to it. Villon, the most modern, the most immediate of poets, kept to forms—ballade, rondeau, villanelle—which had been used and exploited by all and sundry poets for a century or so before he began. A genius ought to have broken the mold. He simply used the forms worn thin with repetition and filled them with life.

Between the mid-eighteenth century and early nineteenth a revolution in taste came about which can be pinpointed in the changed meaning of a single word. In the eighteenth century, to describe someone as *an original* implied that he was a grotesque, an eccentric to the point of idiocy, even an aboriginal. In the arts the young beginner was expected to choose the best models to imitate. Even Burns, in his first book of poems, is anxious to name the Scottish poets whose example had taught him how to write. Imitating the best models was a guarantee of correctness. "Correct" sounds odd to modern ears as a form of praise. But it is a key word in Haydn's concise and thoughtful eulogy of his junior, Mozart, and it is perfectly apt. Mozart kept to the narrow limits of key range established in his time as usable and "correct." And one might almost say he lived, thought, and wrote in sonata form, which occurs even in the finale of one act of *Figaro.* In his early maturity he was deeply influenced by his encounter with the forty-eight preludes and fugues, the only work of Bach still then available. The great as well as the dull fugues have a formal logic much stricter even than sonata form. But what would Mozart have said if confronted by the wilder audacities of that outsider Domenico Scarlatti? We can only imagine.

What had happened to uproot and overturn such firmly rooted conventions? Nothing less than the most dramatic, picturesque, succinct, and stylish of revolutions. In its five-year career, 1789-1794, it unrolls like the work of some supernal dramatist; each act in the drama reverses or contradicts the direction of the previous one, intensifies the carnage and the pace of the action, throws up a new hero, exposing the previous one as villain, alters the range of victims as it turns up all the colors of political conviction in succession. In the end, it established a new deity, and a new era of time, neither of which was to last long. Its effects in the arts were much more durable. The rule of rococo taste and the *ancien régime* fell as effortlessly as the Bastille. One of the greatest exponents of the old style in painting, Fragonard, died workless and in poverty in 1806. Rococo art melted away before the moral austerity of David, the painter-laureate of the Revolution and the Empire. Disciples and students of his school, in the Academy, used Watteau's masterpiece, *The Embarcation for Cythera,* as a target for darts and peashooters.

But in social terms, the French Revolution opened up the world, not of freedom and equality, but of the bourgeoisie, with its safe canons of taste, its prudery, and its Salon. Many an eighteenth-century novel has more sexual frankness than *Madame Bovary,* tried and condemned for its "indecency"—like *Les Fleurs du mal*—in 1857. More and more the artist and writer tended to become not so much an outlaw but a rebel in the midst of the class from which he sprang. Vitality in painting moved from the Salon to the Salon des Refusés. The required conventions of the former forced the genuine artist to be an innovator until, in the present century, innovation and revolt—whether real or spurious—became the required thing, almost a convention in itself. And the arts pullulated with "movements"—Futurism, Dadaism, Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, and dozens more besides. Many an artist has started and finished a movement by himself.

There is an element of desperation underlying this continual evolution which reflects itself in many a study of the period, as well as in the essays here collected in Roger Shattuck's *The Innocent Eye.*[1] Written over the past twenty years, these deal with Baudelaire

1 *The Innocent Eye: On Modern Literature and the Arts* by Roger Shattuck; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 326 pages, $18.95.

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and Valéry, Artaud and Malraux, Duchamps, Magritte, and Monet, Stravinsky and Apollinaire, as well as subjects indicated by such essay titles as "The Demon of Originality," "The Poverty of Modernism," and "How to Rescue Literature." As a survey of modern art and modern literature this collection is bound, like any other, to be personal and limited in its choice of examples. The trouble is that in trying to correlate, to achieve an overview, Shattuck so frequently makes rather random generalizations. "We need not be surprised," he says, "that the most successful scenes and themes in Flaubert and Proust, as in Joyce and Kafka, are superbly comic." Or again, in a passage on the fragmentation of the arts, he remarks:

> Thus the fragment, which would first appear to be a mode of anti-structure, itself shapes the way we perceive the world and recast it into works of art. The most striking demonstration of that statement may be simply to quote the three principal modernist poets in English. Because things won't fit together, all three poets reach a point at which they allude affirmatively, even affectionately, to an ethos of the junkyard. They appear satisfied to accumulate objects and words and ideas simply tossed together without rhyme or reason. In "The Circus Animals' Desertion," Yeats, trying to find a central self beyond successive personae, makes his ultimate appeal to "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." In an early draft of *Canto II,* Pound twits the "art-form" of his Sordello: "The modern world/ Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thoughts in." And Eliot closes *The Waste Land* with a terse description of its genre and form: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins."
>
> Perhaps we have come to fear an overarching unity more than we yearn for one.

Yeats a *modernist* poet! His remark, "I too have tried to be modern," is clearly ironic and dismissive. He had no truck with the "isms" of the day. Even his patriotism is fiercely tempered by his ultimate view of Ireland as that "blind and bitter land" with its "great hatred, little room." And the poem

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Shattuck alludes to, so far from being "simply tossed together without rhyme or reason," is in fact fully rhymed and clearly reasoned, one of the least difficult of Yeats's later poems. And the "rag-and-bone shop" line is both a startling climax and a calm acceptance of what it says. It relates to another, to the effect that love is "enthroned in the excrement." The poetry of Yeats is more firmly *earthed,* more coherent from beginning to end, than that of Eliot, Pound, or Stevens—or any other of the big names of the century.

I can only feel that these assembled quotations have been drawn together by the magnetism of a word: *rag*-and-bone, *frag*ment, *rag*-bag. The latter will serve as an unkind definition of some of Pound's cantos. Eliot's famous line is anything but a final statement: it is an apology for the formal disarray of the poem. He was a great detector of decadence in other writers, with whom he had no wish to be equated. Later, as an Anglican convert, he could feel that any suspicion of formal decadence in his work was underpinned by a certain doctrinal and dogmatic rigor. With *Four Quartets* he attains an "overarching unity" with a vengeance. Many passages have the majestic and final authority of a religious "leader" in the London *Times,* cast into characteristic free verse.

How many meanings are there to innocence, innocent eye? The child's eye that saw that the emperor's robes were nonexistent saw a fact, but might have been deceived by actual appearances, or by the child's own imaginings. Shattuck is much given to discovering relationships which I for one cannot appreciate. In the essay that gives the book its title, he starts out from Keats's famous expressed wish for Negative Capability, for "remaining in doubts and uncertainties," and finds that this bears a close relation to "a startling number of key concepts in modern criticism and philosophy," including Brecht the dramatist's "alienation effect," a committed Marxist's device to arrest the simulated action of the play in order to inculcate the *message.* Brecht, I think, would have despised Keats's refusal of commitment, just as much as Sartre did Baudelaire's.

Turning to Apollinaire, some of whose poems Shattuck has translated, he reconsiders the *Calligrammes,* and proclaims of one of these, the "Lettre-Océan": "I now believe this poem deserves a place beside *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and *The Rite of Spring,*" meaning it is no less momentous than these in the history of the century's achievements in arts and letters.

When Apollinaire's masterwork, *Alcools,* appeared in 1913, the poet challenged to a duel the reviewer who pointed out all the echoes and imitations of earlier poets, from Villon to Verlaine and Rimbaud, to be found in its pages. In fact the book is thronged with echoes of past poetry, as Eliot's verse is with fragmentary quotations—a more original technique to produce a similar effect. Apollinaire's borrowings from the capital of French poetry are justified by their rich returns in his own. But he was tormented by that reviewer's accusation. He yearned to be a total *original.* Like a contemporary odd immigrant to Paris, Gertrude Stein, he was obsessed by the ferment of excitement, change, and revolution going on all round him in the visual arts, and equally determined to work the same transformation in writing. Gertrude's answer to the problem was simplification of vocabulary (on the model of the Cubist reduction of forms?) with a telescoping and a hypnotic repetition of words and phrases. From this she ultimately developed a tart, chatty, and unmistakable style of her own.

Apollinaire's attempted solution was more drastic, and really more naïve. How do you make a poem visually as simultaneous in its impact as a painting? Well . . . "Open up a newspaper," says Apollinaire. "Immediately ten, twenty different events jump out at you. The two big headlines printed daily on the front page of *Paris Midi,* isn't that Simultanist poetry?" No, it isn't. Unless you have multiple eyes, separately focused, and with a line of their own to a conscious brain, you cannot read two headlines, still less "ten or twenty events," *quite* simultaneously. And as

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for Simultanism in a painting, the retina can register the whole of a picture in a second's glance, but how much can the brain derive from that? A picture too has to have a time dimension, has to be *read* by the eye moving from one section, one detail to another before it can be appreciated, admired, or dismissed, a process which can take days, months, or years.

Calligraphy is a visual art. There is an aesthetics of type. The lie of printed words on a page, like Chinese or Arabic script, can have beauty without any knowledge of their meaning. But the poem as a picture, whether an altar or "a pair of lady's gloves," is a timeworn baroque conceit. The Mouse's Tale in "Alice" is as good a picture poem as any, and you can read it from beginning to end and then stop. Not so Apollinaire's calligrammes. The words are arranged centripetally or centrifugally, like spokes, around one or more concentric circles of words, with perhaps more words inside the main circle. "Where, then, shall we start reading?" asks Shattuck. He might well, since the poem at least achieves the "originality" of having no visible beginning or ending. Undeterred, and after an eight-page discourse on possible origins and influences, including Mallarmé, Delaunay, as well as the Larionov-Goncharova show of June 17, 1914, which was attended by Diaghilev, Pavlova, Nijinsky, Cocteau, Cendrars, and all the best of the fashionable artistic world, he continues with eleven pages of conjectural analysis, of which a brief excerpt will have to serve: "This secondary figure located 'On the left bank in front of the Iéna Bridge' may represent the radial field of the poet's consciousness next to the more powerful field of the Eiffel Tower with its radio mast. Yet there is another possibility." Yes, indeed. There used to be a Ferris wheel, brightly lit, with forty suspended gondolas, close by the Eiffel Tower which added "the excitement of motion to the wonder of height." Finally, after a reiterated comparison with those Demoiselles and that Rite, we are given a summing up: "The commonplace device of a friendly correspondence between two brothers . . . descends unabashedly to the level of illustrated greeting-card without jettisoning its ambitious freight of meanings about the shape of consciousness and the rhythm of perception." What *is* that shape, and that rhythm?

When Shattuck descends from his own empyrean of correlations, conjectures, and possibilities, he can write a good, sound piece—for example on Artaud, that "whirling dervish of literature as self-performance," or Malraux, the rhetorical "conqueror" of total insight into the human psyche, politics, and the arts of man. But once again the innocent eye gets to work in a study of Valéry which simply recapitulates the fashionable view of the writer at the peak of his reputation. "We tend to dismiss . . . the two most important facts about him. He renounced the composition of poetry not once but twice." He renounced, yes, but never gave it up. Throughout his career he remained something of a poet *malgré lui,* aspiring to more important things. His work as a whole needs a more radical assessment than what was the accepted view, up to forty years ago.

The deeds and words of Ivy Compton-Burnett

Hilary Spurling Ivy:
The Life of I. Compton-Burnett.
Knopf, 621 pages, $22.95

reviewed by Sonya Rudikoff

Ivy Compton-Burnett, the English novelist, died in 1969 at the age of eighty-five, known for her nineteen novels, but not well known. She wrote no memoirs or autobiography, no criticism, no short stories, no essays, poetry, or nonfictional reportage. She did not participate in panel discussions or teach or give lectures or read papers or speak at conferences on modern literature. She was rarely interviewed, not active in literary organizations, not on committees of writers or on radio and television programs.

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She did not organize petitions or protests, she was not seen in restaurants or pubs, or in Cornwall, St. Tropez, Gstaad, Ischia, Rhodes or Marrakech. She did not talk about her writing; when she and T. S. Eliot met, they discussed fishmongers and greengrocers. After she died, her private papers consisted of little more than a shoe box half full of engagement diaries and a few letters. There were no files of material about her career, no secretaries tending the archives, no elaborate machinery of publicity and self-promotion. When, at the end of her life, she was speaking with a young woman who had recently attempted suicide, Compton-Burnett remarked, "You've done a deed, haven't you?" About herself she insisted, "I haven't been at all deedy. Not at all."

Was that true? And, without "deeds" to draw upon, what would a life of this writer be about? Hilary Spurling, Compton-Burnett's latest biographer, confronts the problem successfully in *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett.* Mrs. Spurling has added a full new volume, *Secrets of a Woman's Heart,* to the first volume, *Ivy When Young,* which was published in 1974. Together they make a large methodical biography of more than six hundred pages which will surely stand as the definitive work on a mysterious and intriguing twentieth-century English writer. In working on her biography, Mrs. Spurling had lengthy conversations with two Compton-Burnett sisters, born in 1891 and 1893, and she seems to have spoken on numerous occasions with almost everyone who knew the person she refers to throughout the book as "Ivy." The greater part of Mrs. Spurling's information came from such conversations, although she has also consulted records and has traced the antecedents and explored the putative link to Bishop Burnet, the seventeenth-century historian. She knows all the novels thoroughly, and makes frequent use of the light they throw on their creator's awareness and experience. Mrs. Spurling did not herself know the novelist, but she has had access to the memories of friends and relatives who did, so much so that she conveys an unusual sense of intimacy with her subject. The reliability of sources is not questioned, unless they openly and impossibly contradicted one another's stories, as in the versions of a dinner with Ivy Compton-Burnett when a young man fell asleep over the soup and awoke to find that the novelist had finished dinner and gone to bed. Was it Francis Birrell, or David Garnett, or Philip Toynbee? And when did it happen, if at all? Or was it Ezra Pound and another situation entirely?

Perhaps Compton-Burnett's life really did have few "deeds" in it, at least in the heroic or dramatic sense. It was a life lived in one of those large late Victorian families of many stages and branches and generations, which came to an end in 1919, although it could be seen breaking up in 1901, as the Edwardian years began. In fact, her father, an energetic and innovative homeopathic physician, died only a few months after the venerable Queen Victoria, leaving twelve children from his two marriages (one had died in a childhood accident). For the next eighteen years, Ivy Compton-Burnett's life was punctuated and determined by family deaths. Late Victorian mourning customs had followed the Queen's extravagant practice ever since 1862: black was decreed for all, even the littlest children, seclusion was mandatory, and the bereaved were encouraged to act out their losses inside the family with prolonged visible, audible lamentations; the withdrawal from the world reinforced emotional tyrannies. Henry James might have commented on the story of the Compton-Burnetts, if he had known them. The American writer was moved by a similar tragedy in the London household of Leslie Stephen between 1895 and 1906. He would have noted the complex resonance of the six successive deaths in this family, as he had earlier sighed over the four deaths among the Stephens. Of the twelve children, there were to be no descendants except for the nineteen novels produced by the eldest of the doctor's second family; the only "deeds" to be recorded had to do with death. Mrs. Spurling responds to this biographical challenge by giving close attention to family relation-

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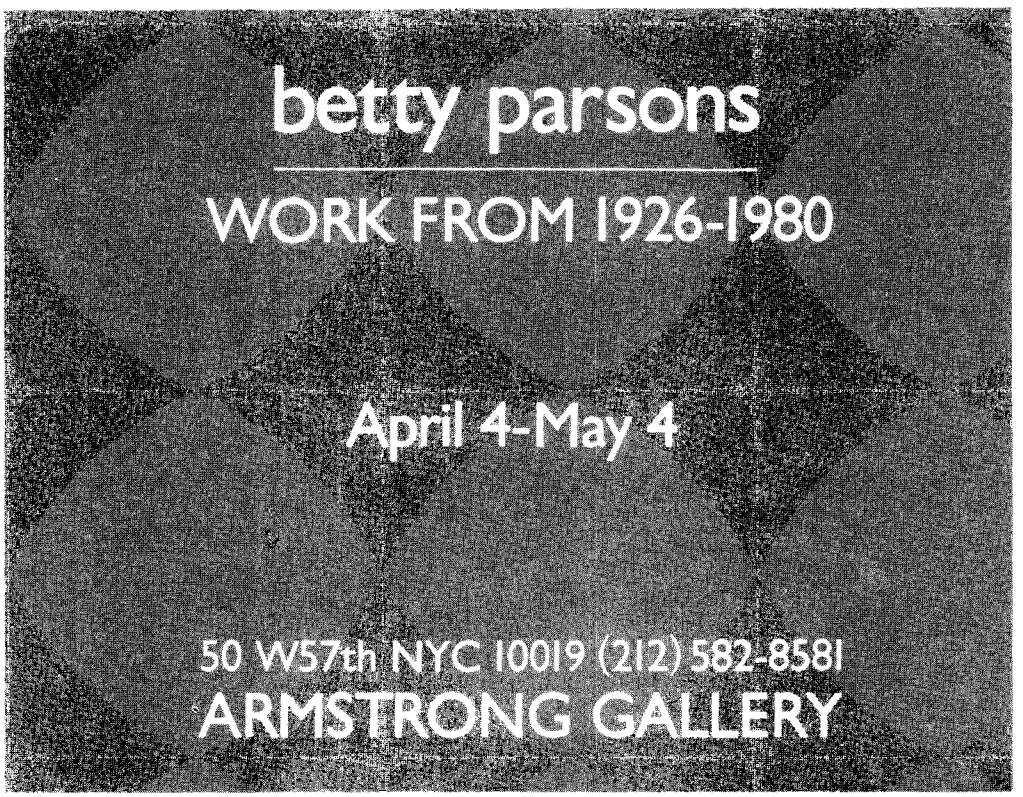

ships, organizing both volumes in terms of the dominant clusters of emotional experience before and after 1919.

Like the Stephenses, like innumerable other families in the late nineteenth century, the two families of Doctor Compton Burnett[1] exemplified the patterns of the period—in parental mortality, in remarriages, in second and even third families, in stepmothers, half brothers and half sisters, step-uncles, aunts, cousins at every level, friends of relatives and relatives of friends. It is this representative life which Mrs. Spurling infers from Compton-Burnett's novels, developing her biography by extrapolating the novelist's own experience from her fictions about the "deeds" of others. Family matters offered a rich set of metaphors; questions of lineal descent, legitimate and illegitimate possession, rights and expectations, sovereignty and rebellion, love and power; the family setting provided a stage for action where varied interests could be set in motion. That material from late Victorian family life may be deceptive and misleading however: the paraphernalia of it, the wills and beneficiaries, constraints and customs, houses, marriages, and servants, may personify the terms in which these dramas of tyranny developed, but Compton-Burnett was not trying to do Jane Austen over again.

A Compton-Burnett novel doesn't begin with a hero or heroine returning alone from a long trip abroad, or walking alone in a city, or leaving for a solitary mission of self-discovery, but usually with a scene at breakfast, when some people are waiting for others, and, as in a play, their complex relations and history are established in the first few lines. There are few descriptions either of people or places, the scenes are not set, there is little authorial comment or stream of consciousness or interior monologue, very little that could be called symbolic or lyrical or poetic. Characters are virtually never shown

1 The Doctor and his first family had no hyphen in their name. His second wife, socially ambitious for her homeopathic physician, added a hyphen, and the children of the second family maintained it.

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alone, always in relation to others. The actions are neither described nor fantasied, nor celebrated, but instead presented in dialogue. The dramatic quality of the novels has often been noted, and some of them have even been done successfully as television plays. They are as different as possible from the modern novel known to us in Proust, Mann, Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, Kafka. There is no Jamesian "scene," or Proustian ambiance, neither Mann's thickness of texture, nor Woolf's lyrical mysticism, nor Joyce's symbolism, nor the evangelical emotionality of Lawrence. Instead, there are echoes of Ibsen, of Pirandello, of Chekhov. There are affinities with Samuel Butler, but crossed with the dramatic intentions of Ionesco and Beckett.

Compton-Burnett treated the novel as a kind of scientific experiment, as George Eliot thought it was, multiplying the complexities to test the possibilities. The novels do not present the novelist's own story, though, and her biographer had to exercise care in inferring her experience from the fictional presentations. In other novels of the period, there is no difficulty in discerning the hero or heroine, the character standing for the novelist and complemented by the appropriate opponents. How easily readers can situate themselves in a novel by Lawrence or Woolf or Hemingway! It is more difficult in a Compton-Burnett novel, which is without those privileged alignments and agendas. None of the novels presents the First World War, despite its supreme importance for this novelist, nor the Second World War and its aftermath, although eleven of the novels were published between 1944 and 1969. Many of Compton-Burnett's plots involve a county family, with either an old name or property, or a title (not aristocratic, but a baronetcy or perhaps a knighthood) and an assortment of contiguous occupations and households at different social levels. Compare the novelist's own youth, which was spent very differently, in new housing put up on the outskirts of London as the Victorian railroads developed. Her father's property consisted of small shops, small farms, and semi-detached houses acquired as his practice grew, not a mellow ancestral property, not the inherited glory of the rich. The house in which her own family dramas took root was a red brick monstrosity in Hove, the western end of Brighton, built up in the late 1890s. The doctor, no lord of the manor, commuted to his London office twice a week, staying in town at the Holborn Viaduct Hotel. His first father-in-law had been a homeopathic chemist; his second father-in-law was a powerful dominating man, an engineering surveyor, civic figure, Mayor of Dover, and a prominent Methodist. Nothing of this history is in the novels. Mrs. Spurling has dealt with it deftly, however, reading back from the fiction in feelings and possibilities, instead of reading from life to art.

The end of the First World War marked a punctuation in the novelist's life, and Mrs. Spurling's book appropriately divides there. By 1919, Compton-Burnett's father had died, as had her closest brother, her mother, her most important adored brother (in the Battle of the Somme, after an exhilarating time at King's College, Cambridge), and her two younger sisters (in a joint suicide). Other deaths in the surrounding family and other sufferings marked this time. Compton-Burnett's own near fatal illness signalized the end of her life in the family, inaugurating the life she would live for more than thirty years with Margaret Jourdain, the writer on decorative arts, whom she met in the dark days of 1918-19. In London flats, first in Bayswater, then in South Kensington, they inhabited sparsely furnished rooms, pale austere places relieved only by Chippendale, Sheraton, and Hepplewhite tables, chairs, and fire screens, rooms without pictures, only mirrors, with a balcony where Compton-Burnett grew flowers. She began to write her characteristic novels in the Twenties (after a single uncharacteristic one of 1911), publishing them every two or three years, the first two at her own expense.

Margaret Jourdain's many friends from the museums, galleries, auction houses, and

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society knew Compton-Burnett as the silent, inconspicuous companion of their "M.J.," that ingenious woman who had lived by her wits from early days. The spirited daughter of a poor Derbyshire vicar with a large family and an ancient name, Margaret Jourdain went to Oxford and wanted to be a poet, but in order to earn a livelihood she made herself into an expert on furniture. She worked independently for most of her life, benefitting only later from retainers, and from a yearly allowance provided by an anonymous well-wisher. She wrote on lace, on chairs, on Regency furniture, on William Kent; she knew about Adam fireplaces, Coalport china, wallpaper, tapestries, jewelry, hangings, paneling—all those absorbing subjects covered in *Apollo, The Connoisseur, The Art Journal, Country Life,* and other journals. She advised the innumerable rich friends who adored her, she inspected collections in country houses, she consulted for decorators, she counseled curators, she knew the salesrooms, she was expert with her glass in detecting faked chairs or "married" tables. It was a propitious time for this work: in earlier days, such people were often the in-house advisers for aristocratic collectors, but in the late nineteenth century changes in the sources of wealth and concomitant social changes spurred the professionalization of taste. After the First World War, one fifth to one fourth of the land and property in England came on the market; the circulation of antiques, the interest in decoration, architecture, and design, soon produced professional occupations for gifted people like Margaret Jourdain.

"M.J." was active, inventive, energetic, and enterprising; she surrounded herself with witty and clever young men, she was sociable, practical, irreverent, unself-conscious; her confidence in her own taste and sense was tremendous. The museum and auction-room friends were not very interested in her self-effacing companion, who knew little about furniture and cared little; nor, following "M.J.," did they pay much attention to the novels she wrote. Certainly, "M.J." had rescued the debilitated Ivy

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Compton-Burnett at the end of the First World War, and provided affection, stability, indulgent loyalty, and brisk cynicism in a non-familial relation which pleased them both. "M.J." was the performing one, Compton-Burnett the silent observant one. Whether it was also a sexual relationship—Mrs. Spurling, as well as their close friends, believe it was not—the long association of the two women had a proto-familial character.[2]

When the older woman died in 1951 at the age of seventy-five, the loss renewed all Compton-Burnett's losses of the past. Still, she survived another eighteen years, published six more novels, became more widely known, and gathered new friends. She was made a Dame and a Companion of Literature, she received prizes and honors, her reputation was enhanced, her books read. The absence of Margaret Jourdain from her life was never to be repaired. They had not even thought they would meet in Heaven, as both of them in late Victorian fashion had foregone the consolations of religion. Even as a vicar's child, "M.J." had refused to hear more about the suffering of Jesus—"that poor man"—and Ivy had early rejected what she saw only as a mystification, a theological buttressing of family tyranny. Neither one was revolutionary, nor did they actively or intellectually engage any of the aspects of family and social structure which had nearly crippled their lives. As educated women of spirit and independence they made their own lives once each had escaped from the network of late Victorian family obligation, but they maintained no programmatic or theoretical opposition to the world they had rejected. They accommodated themselves to it, in seemingly eccentric fashion, in what may seem a characteristically English fashion.

Accommodation and apparent eccentricity were of course facilitated by Compton-Burnett's substantial income. Margaret Jourdain's poor but clever father had no legacy to bequeath except for his ancient Huguenot name—Jourdains had fought in the First and Third Crusades—and his daughter's income was modest if not at times precarious. In contrast, the homeopathic physician had left £67,000 in 1901. (Given the falling pound and the rise in the cost of living since 1901, the significance of that estate can be seen more clearly when the standard working-class wage of those days is recalled: "round about a pound a week"; that was a familiar music-hall phrase, providing the title for a famous Fabian study of incomes and living conditions. Of some 345,000 people who died in 1901, barely seventeen percent left any estate at all; of those, the largest number, about sixteen thousand, left estates of £1,000-£10,000. Throughout the entire country, less than three hundred people were in Doctor Compton Burnett's category, that is, the category of those leaving estates between £50,000 and £75,000.) It was this estate, then, which maintained the widow and her seven children, and which came under Ivy Compton-Burnett's control at her mother's death in 1911. Even after some of the property was sold, some of the first family provided with incomes, and the estate divided among the surviving children of the second family, Compton-Burnett's inheritance made possible a life of comfort and ease: £150-£200 was a decent middle-class income, as it had been for much of the nineteenth century; £1000 for a single woman without dependents was considerable. There was no need to resort to that most shameful recourse of the middle class, dipping into capital. Later, she did begin to feel impoverished, especially when the Depression reduced her income to near £750, but it went up after that, and book sales also augmented it. When she was very ill in

2 After Margaret Jourdain's death, there was some difficulty in finding her will. The executor, a close friend of the two women, suggested that Compton-Burnett look in her bedroom. "I have never been in Margaret's bedroom," Compton-Burnett responded, "and I don't mean to start now." Mrs. Spurling's treatment of this matter of the women's relationship is limited and superficial. She seems unaware of the extensive scholarly work on nineteenth-century women's love and friendship, and relies journalistically on the summaries of others.

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1966, and burdened with hospital charges, surgeons' fees, and nurses, the Royal Literary Fund, at the behest of her friends, sent an emergency grant of £500 but refused to make another one after an inquiry into her resources disclosed not penury but prudence. At Compton-Burnett's own death, her estate was £86,000, which was disbursed in carefully thought out provisions and legacies. Friends were instructed to assemble at the flat immediately after a bleak service, and the various articles bequeathed in the will were distributed methodically by Compton-Burnett's solicitor. The occasion impressed everyone as a scene from one of her novels.

"It is useless to pursue the past," says one of her characters; another replies, "It is needless . . . It will pursue us." That aphoristic style, sometimes witty or acutely revealing or disjunctive, is employed to disclose self-regard and lack of awareness. No one is protected or given sanctuary. Those readers who thought the novels were about the tyranny of the old over the young must be disabused of such comfortable notions. "Of course stepmothers are cruel," someone observes about one of Compton-Burnett's familiar types, ". . . then so are stepchildren, though they don't have any of the discredit." The experiment which each of the novels represents is not weighted in favor of the witty or the young or the passionately self-actualizing persons of the drama, nor, again, in favor of the old, or the withdrawn sacrificial ones, or the vulnerable and victimized. When a young person unhesitatingly asserts,

> Truth is truth and a lie is a lie . . . . We ought not to mind a searchlight being turned on our inner selves, if we are honest about them,

another is sure to respond knowingly,

> . . . "Know thyself" is a most superfluous direction. We can't avoid it.

But, implicitly challenging them both, still another will observe,

> We can only hope that no one else knows.

If one character insists that telling the truth is the kindest thing, another, whose life is intricately linked with the first, will wonder then what would be the unkindest, and in the exchange the conflicting purposes of each one will not only be revealed but the very disclosure will be what advances the action. Perhaps the novels need to be read with the sensibility of Stanislavsky, to illuminate the depth and intensity of dramatic encounter, or perhaps Bakhtin, especially the novels without authorial voice. When a young man teasingly challenges an older woman to relax her rules about dressing for dinner, their exchange may carry some echo of their milieu or of the tone of the time, but its interest lies more in the subtle deconstruction which the characters execute upon one another as well as on the novel itself:

> Stay by all means. Your clothes do not matter at all.
>
> I noticed that you thought that about clothes; and I see that your clothes did not matter; but I don't think mine can be dismissed like that.

In Ivy Compton-Burnett's later years, much was made of her eccentricity. Her crisp anti-romantic style was read as if it crystallized the look and character of an earlier, old-fashioned epoch. There was the Cecil Beaton photograph of a severe mysterious face with a velvet band across the forehead, as she sat in one of the old chairs placed between the fire screens. The teas at Braemar Mansions were well known, those "Braemar gatherings," as they were called, when she and Margaret Jourdain entertained with cucumber sandwiches, oatcakes, meringues, a honeycomb; there were reports of wit, of cranky, fastidious remarks, of startling insights. The two women were devoted to their friends, warm and generous, but they could be sarcastic about those who ignored them or valued them lightly, and they could be cold to those who left them. Compton-Burnett felt that her publisher didn't work

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actively enough on her behalf; her novels did not sell brilliantly, as did those of other writers, and she could be heard to say of Elizabeth Bowen, "People are always writing to tell her about the death of their hearts . . . . I suppose her publisher sends her peaches." She could be rude about the Sitwells, caustic about T. S. Eliot, when he and his new wife moved into her Kensington neighborhood; she could chillingly silence that renowned "brilliant" talker Rebecca West. Lunch with Compton-Burnett was a little like lunch with General de Gaulle, according to the French ambassador's wife: "Ce n'est pas facile." Friends have generously provided such material for Mrs. Spurling. There are also accounts of the novelist's warmth, charm, and thoughtfulness, but most of the stories illustrate her more distinctive late formidable manner. Thus, she is seen in the Fifties, when Blanche Knopf hesitated about an American edition of her thirteenth novel, *The Present and the Past,* because American sales had been disappointing: having decided against an American edition, Mrs. Knopf presented the novelist with a bouquet of flowers wrapped in cellophane—("I thought she was going to give me a doll")—and later thanked her for behaving like a lady. Compton-Burnett recounted it to friends, adding, "What did she expect me to do? Hit her?"

That eccentricity, those incisive characteristic rejoinders, like the earlier role of silent, self-effacing companion, provided a kind of incognito. As one of her complex ambiguous characters observed, in a novel of 1933, "The old-world atmosphere is so important, and I pay it strict attention." When Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West first met Ivy Compton-Burnett, they were both well-known literary figures, and they patronized her as a shy nervous spinster. The Hogarth Press had rejected her second novel, *Brothers and Sisters,* which she published at her own expense in 1929, but for the next nine or ten years Woolf would be kept awake by the favorable reviews of Compton-Burnett's novels. Of Woolf, two years older than herself, the spinster observed in the late 1950s, "She

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was a bit malicious, you know—she'd say the most dreadful things about people. Of course one does oneself. But one doesn't expect it of Virginia Woolf."

The biography is much less successful with Margaret Jourdain and the public self she cultivated; she never seems quite real, is seen too much from the outside, as a prodigious figure, and nothing inward can be inferred from her writing on lace and furniture. Her dazzled admirers were fond of her impertinences; if she asserted that no chair worth sitting in had been made since the Reform Bill, no one bothered to question whether it was the 1832 Bill or the 1867 Bill —actually a detail of great importance—but just applauded her severe taste. It is perhaps that spell which prevents the biographer from exploring in depth the question that would make "M.J." a more realized person, that is, the meaning of the marked divergence in the work and life interests of the two women. The scene at Braemar Mansions, so often described, so bright and witty, might profit from a closer scrutiny of what these two stood for. Here was Margaret Jourdain, assessing artifacts of the past, professionally serving curators, collectors, and heirs, benefiting from that exigent and complex market, and there, sitting in her chair by the fire, was Compton-Burnett, silently producing her sparsely furnished novels, recording and at the same time deconstructing the very world in which artifacts are preserved and then transformed from aesthetic objects into commodities. Did one of them undo what the other did?

Compton-Burnett, young and old, remains somewhat mysterious, then. To reflect on what other writers might have done in that ambiance—or in fact have done!—and how her material might have been used differently, reinforces one's sense of her unique accomplishment, which can be defined as much by what it does not do as by what it does. The absence of remembered and fantasied settings, the indifference to loving evocations of lawn, vista, and the mellow brick of country houses, speak by not being there. No poignant fountains are gravely apostrophized, no gardens where the peacock strayed, no energies expressing the rich abundance of civilization. Compton-Burnett was not really that kind of writer at all. She never, in fact, held to the reader's ear a shell of the sea of the past. So the Cecil Beaton portrait is not much help; its image of the eccentric, fantastic, and formidable character of the vanished world is crucially misleading. A reader may feel that the woman in the biography couldn't have written the novels, it must have been another person.

Schopenhauer's world

Bryan Magee The Philosophy of Schopenhauer. Oxford University Press, 400 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Roger Kimball

Thomas Mann was in his early twenties—and in the middle of writing *Buddenbrooks*—when he first read Schopenhauer. The intoxicating effect of "drinking that metaphysical magic potion," he recalled years later, "can only be compared with the one which the first contact with love and sex produces in the young mind." For Mann, as for so many writers and artists of his generation, the discovery of Schopenhauer was nothing less than a revelation, a new way of looking at the world and one's place in it. From *Buddenbrooks* and *Death in Venice* to *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus,* Mann's work exhibits the stamp and spirit of Schopenhauer's influence, and it is only natural that he named Schopenhauer, along with Nietzsche and Wagner, as one of "the three great Germans who were the shapers of my nature."

Nietzsche and Wagner paid similar homage to Schopenhauer. The young Nietzsche, in *Schopenhauer as Educator,* the third of his *Untimely Meditations,* wrote that "I am one of those readers of Schopenhauer who when they have read one page of him know for certain that they will go on to read all the pages and will heed every word he ever said."

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Though Nietzsche later repudiated Schopenhauer's romantic pessimism as "decadent," he never denied the formative impact that Schopenhauer had on his own thinking, and he continued throughout his career to extol him as a model of intellectual independence and honesty. Many of Nietzsche's central philosophical ideas—his doctrine of the will to power, for example, or his celebrated Apollo/Dionysus dichotomy—can be shown to derive directly from Schopenhauer. And Wagner, in his autobiography, recalled the excitement of his first encounter with Schopenhauer's work: "Schopenhauer's book was never completely out of my mind, and by the following summer I had studied it from cover to cover four times. It had a radical influence on my whole life."

By the turn of the century, such tributes to Schopenhauer's influence were commonplace, especially among artists and writers. Schopenhauer had become an inescapable cultural force, his philosophy epitomizing the mood—at once extravagantly febrile, even enervated, yet bursting with creativity—of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. Indeed, it may be said that Schopenhauer provided a systematic vocabulary for those distinctively modern feelings, perceptions, and experiences that were to transform the artistic and intellectual life of the West from the 1870s to the end of the First World War.

Schopenhauer published the first edition of his major work, *The World as Will and Representation,* in 1818, but it was not until the 1850s, when he was in his sixties, that his work began to exercise any real influence. No doubt the widespread disillusionment that followed in the wake of the revolutions of 1848 helped pave the way for the triumph of his relentlessly disillusioning philosophy. Schopenhauer's atheism and evolutionism, his insight into the unconscious and irrational dimension of man's nature, his assertion of the primacy of sexuality, his apotheosis of art and aesthetic experience as a *compensation* for life: these were the features of his thought that answered to the age's impatience with Enlightenment optimism and its naïve trust in reason and science, its faith in inevitable progress and the perfection of man.

Yet despite Schopenhauer's once colossal presence, his influence declined steadily through the Twenties and Thirties. By 1938 Mann could write in his essay on Schopenhauer that he was attempting "to evoke a figure little known to the present generation." And while there is no question of Schopenhauer's attaining anything like his former stature—the novel elements of his teaching have been too completely assimilated by conventional wisdom for that to happen—Bryan Magee convincingly argues in his new study of the philosopher that there are "unmistakable signs of a serious revival of interest." No doubt the renewed interest in *fin-de-siècle* culture—one thinks, for example, of popular studies like Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* or Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin's *Wittgenstein's Vienna*—is in part responsible for the revival of interest in Schopenhauer that Magee discerns. But it is also the case, as Magee argues, that the current disenchantment with positivism—as much in art and literary studies as in philosophy—has helped kindle a renaissance of interest in Schopenhauer as both a cultural influence and a thinker in his own right.

It is appropriate that Schopenhauer, who despised the academy and academic philosophy, should find as his latest champion a decidedly nonacademic man of letters. A Member of Parliament and author of books on Karl Popper, modern British philosophy, and Wagner, Magee sets out in *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* to provide an introduction to Schopenhauer's thought and an overview of his influence. As such, he has succeeded in producing the most comprehensive work in English on Schopenhauer since Patrick Gardiner's *Schopenhauer* (1963). (*The Philosophy of Schopenhauer,* incidentally, is dedicated to Gardiner.) Magee not only outlines his philosophical system but also reminds us of how crucial an ingredient in *fin-de-siècle* cultural life Schopenhauer was. It is no exaggeration to say that many of the

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leading figures of that time—including Wittgenstein and Freud—cannot be understood without some appreciation of their debt to Schopenhauer.

Magee's book opens with a biographical sketch and then proceeds to review the philosophical tradition out of which Schopenhauer emerged. It offers a reasonably thorough exposition of his main philosophical writings, concentrating on *The World as Will and Representation*. Magee goes *seriatim* through each of the four parts of that book, treating in turn Schopenhauer's epistemology, his metaphysics, his theory of art, and his ethics. He concludes with some criticisms and a long series of appendices—they come to more than a third of the book—that investigate various extra-philosophical issues, such as Schopenhauer's relation to Buddhism, and detail Schopenhauer's profound influence on thinkers and artists from Nietzsche and Wagner to Tolstoy, Proust, Conrad, and Mann. An entire appendix is devoted to Schopenhauer's impact on Wittgenstein. The only significant omission here concerns Schopenhauer's considerable influence on the visual arts—one thinks of the Schopenhauerian pronouncements of the *Blaue Reiter* group, for example, or the work of Gustav Klimt, or the writings of de Chirico—which Magee has left out of his account.

Magee has thus assembled a great deal of material, and most students of Schopenhauer will find it a useful, if not especially original, synopsis of his philosophy as well as a handy compilation of facts about his life and influence. In many respects the biographical introduction and the appendices are the most valuable parts of the book. For example, Magee points out that the oft-noted similarity between Schopenhauer's philosophy and Buddhism is not—as is usually held—a result of Buddhism's *influence* on Schopenhauer. On the contrary, Schopenhauer had formulated the central tenets of his philosophy well before he became acquainted with Eastern texts. The important thing was that he arrived at such similar insights independently, for in his mind this

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argued for the fundamental truth of the ideas in question.

Yet while Magee displays an impressive command of Schopenhauer's *oeuvre,* the book is not without serious problems. The more strictly philosophical portions of his text—his discussion of Schopenhauer's philosophical precursors, his explication of transcendental idealism, even his understanding of Schopenhauer's doctrine of the will—are neither rigorous nor reliable. And there is the additional question of whether a secondary source, however competent, really provides the best introduction to Schopenhauer's philosophy. Schopenhauer himself wrote with such clarity and verve—his model is said to have been Hume—that his own works remain the best and most accessible entrée to his thought. One may disagree with a lot that Schopenhauer has to say, but one is seldom at a loss to understand *what* he is saying, a claim that one would hesitate to make for many of his philosophical compatriots.

Schopenhauer is famous above all for his pessimism. As Magee shows, his biography supplies ample support for this dimension of his reputation. After his father died, apparently by his own hand, when Schopenhauer was in his teens, he joined the prosperous family firm as his father had wished, but he found it stifling and soon left to devote himself to learning. "Life is a wretched business," he remarked around this time. "I've decided to spend it trying to understand it." In 1813, Schopenhauer completed his doctoral dissertation and moved to Weimar, to live with his mother, a socially ambitious woman who had achieved considerable renown for her romantic novels. It was here, in Johanna Schopenhauer's fashionable *salon,* that the young Schopenhauer became friendly with Goethe and other literary and artistic figures. Unfortunately, relations between mother and son were at the best of times cool, and now they broke down completely. "She threw him out altogether in the spring of 1814," Magee writes, "and they never saw each other again during the remaining twenty-four years of her life."

After this debacle, Schopenhauer moved to Dresden, where he spent the next four years writing *The World as Will and Representation.* He published it with great expectations and was bitterly disappointed when it went virtually unnoticed. Then, after an extended stay in Italy, Schopenhauer moved to Berlin and made his single bid for a university teaching career. In a characteristically defiant gesture, he deliberately scheduled his lectures at the same time that Hegel—who was then at the pinnacle of fashion but whose philosophy Schopenhauer detested—had scheduled his. The consequence was that no one came and the class had to be canceled. Yet Schopenhauer's amalgam of stubbornness, courage, and intellectual independence—together with the financial independence that he had inherited—enabled him to persevere with his philosophy in the face of almost total neglect. He continued to refine and elaborate his system, bringing out a second, greatly expanded edition of *The World as Will and Representation* in 1844.

Important influences on Schopenhauer's thought include elements of Plato's philosophy and British empiricism, but his chief philosophical debt is to Kant, in his estimation "the most important phenomenon which has appeared in philosophy for two thousand years." All the same, Schopenhauer's deeply empirical cast of mind and curiosity about the natural world made him an oddity in the dominant strain of post-Kantian German philosophy. His "unmistakable, almost physical, rootedness in lived thought and experience," as Magee puts it, shows itself as much in the style of his philosophizing as in the substance of his teaching. It also remarkably prefigures the novelties—substantive as well as stylistic—usually attributed to American pragmatism. And given his lapidary prose style and romantic pessimism, it is perhaps not surprising that Schopenhauer would come to exercise a more pervasive influence on the arts and, through Freud, on psychology than on philosophy. For the wellspring of Schopen-

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hauer's influence lies not in any technical innovation in epistemology—which since Descartes has been the chief interest of most professional philosophers—but in his revaluation of the irrational and unconscious elements of man's nature.

Adapting Kant's distinction between phenomena and things-in-themselves, Schopenhauer divided the world into a realm of interconnected, knowable *representations* and an essentially unfathomable *will.* In his view, man is not primarily a "*rational* animal," "thinking substance," or "person"—as the traditional epithets would have it—but an *animal,* a creature of will. In a figure that strikingly anticipates the insights of psychoanalysis, Schopenhauer compares the human mind to a body of water. Conscious ideas are on the surface, but the depths consist of "the indistinct, the feelings, the after-sensation of perceptions and intuitions and what is experienced in general, mingled with the disposition of our own will that is the kernel of our inner nature." Reason, the intellect, far from being a "pilot" that guides man's will, is a mere servant of the will, a technician that discovers ways to expedite the will's directives. "For consciousness," Schopenhauer insisted,

> is conditioned by the intellect, and the intellect is a mere accident of our being, for it is a function of the brain. The brain, together with the nerves and spinal cord attached to it, is a mere fruit, a product, in fact a parasite, of the rest of the organism, in so far as it is not directly geared to the organism's inner working, but serves the purpose of self-preservation by regulating its relations with the external world.

Schopenhauer thus inverts the traditional, Platonic-Christian image of man, inaugurating an intellectual revolution that looks forward to Darwin (*The Origin of Species* was published in 1859) and modern evolutionary theory. As he wrote in the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation,*

> all philosophers before me, from the first to the last, place the true and real inner nature or

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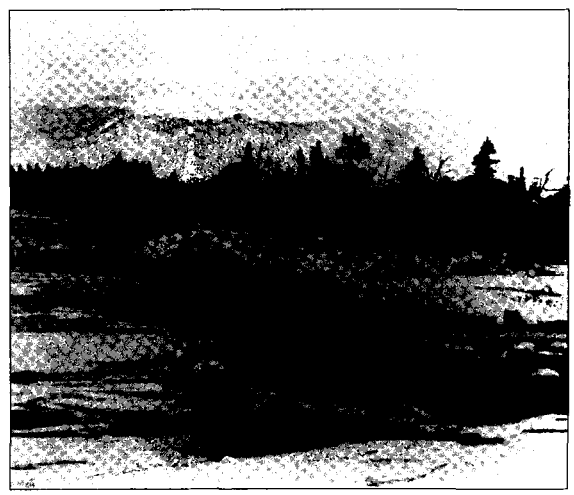

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> kernel of man in the ***knowing*** consciousness. Accordingly, they have conceived and explained the I, or in the case of many of them its transcendent hypostasis called soul, as primarily and essentially ***knowing,*** in fact ***thinking,*** and only in consequence of this, secondarily and derivatively, as ***willing*** . . . . My philosophy . . . puts man's real inner nature not in consciousness but in the will.

Now we should not think primarily of "free will" here. In Schopenhauer's view, man's willing speaks first of all with the immediacy of feelings, moods, desires—especially sexual desire—not in deliberate reasoning or conscious motives. And, as Magee rightly stresses, Schopenhauer regards man's willing as merely one expression of the unfathomable procreant urge that animates all nature. If his reader were to reflect on the inexplicable urgings of his own will, writes Schopenhauer, he would recognize that

> the force that shoots and vegetates in the plant, indeed the force by which the crystal is formed, the force that turns the magnet to the North Pole, . . . and finally even gravitation, which acts so powerfully in all matter, pulling the stone to earth and the earth to the sun; all these he will recognize as different only in the phenomenon, but the same according to their inner nature. He will recognize them all as that which is immediately known to him so intimately and better than everything else, and where it appears most distinctly is called ***will.***

Hence Schopenhauer describes the will as "the thing-in-itself," the "inner content" or "essence" of the world. An endless and ultimately purposeless striving, the will shows itself as much in the pull of gravity or the germination and growth of plants as in man. In most of the will's manifestations, then, the question of "intentions" does not arise.

But Magee misses Schopenhauer's point when he suggests that the term "force" or "energy" would have been preferable to the term "will." Schopenhauer insists on calling the fundamental animating principle of the world "will" precisely because our understanding of the dynamic reality of nature is rooted in the immediate, intuitive grasp we have of our own dynamic reality as striving, wanting, lacking creatures, as creatures of will. Reading ourselves into nature, we extend the name of the reality we know best to the reality of the external world. "I therefore name the genus after its most important species," Schopenhauer explains, "the direct knowledge of which lies nearest to us, and leads to the indirect knowledge of all the others."

According to Schopenhauer, it is the body that, through mood, feeling, and perception, individuates man and roots his experience in the dimension of the will. We experience our body not only as "representation," as one object among others, but also as the locus of our needs and desires, as the theater of the will. And it is just this bodily relation to the will that accounts for the ***weight*** or ***significance*** that we attach to our experience. For if we were purely knowing creatures—"winged cherub[s] without a body," as Schopenhauer put it—then we would view the world completely disinterestedly, as a series of representations that have no real claim on us. Nothing would move or attract or frighten us. But as bodily, willing creatures, the world continually impinges on us. And since we never get to the bottom of the will, we never get to the bottom of experience. Reality, including our own reality, remains in this sense an inexhaustible mystery, ever capable of surprising us. "We often do not know what we desire or fear," Schopenhauer observes in another passage that reminds us of Freud:

> For years we can have a desire without admitting it to ourselves or even letting it come to clear consciousness, because the intellect is not to know anything about it, since the good opinion we have of ourselves would inevitably suffer thereby. But if the wish is fulfilled, we get to know from our joy, not without a feeling of shame, that this is what we desired . . . .

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At the center of Schopenhauer's philosophy is the contention that man's bondage to the will is just that, a bondage. *"Willing,"* he writes, "springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering." And because man is essentially will, he is essentially needy, essentially lacking. Every apparent satisfaction only gives way to boredom or fresh desire. "No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines," Schopenhauer muses,

> it is always like the alms thrown to the beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow. Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace.

But the foundation of Schopenhauer's gloomy diagnosis of the human condition does not lie in his doctrine of the will alone. Rather, it lies in the combination of that doctrine with his insistence that the only true satisfaction is a satisfaction that "lasts and no longer declines," a satisfaction beyond the vagaries of time. Together, they are the ultimate source of his pessimism and his view of human life as tragic. For while Schopenhauer rejects the traditional view that locates man's essential nature in reason, he continues to embrace the traditional Platonic-Christian identification of happiness with completeness, with a final release from all striving.

In what is perhaps his most accomplished expository chapter, "The Flower of Existence," Magee shows that Schopenhauer's high estimation of art and aesthetic experience follows directly from his view of man as a prisoner tormented by a relentless, insatiable will. In Schopenhauer's view, aesthetic experience offers not a *satisfaction* of willing, but a momentary release from the will's demands. Providing an oasis from time in time, aesthetic experience, he writes, "raises us out of the endless stream of willing, and snatches knowledge from the thralldom of the will . . . for the moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will. We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still." Schopenhauer thus follows Kant in his understanding of aesthetic experience as essentially will-less, disinterested experience. Momentarily suspending the claims of desire or interest, aesthetic experience pleases man by intimating a completeness denied to him as a being-in-time. Disinterested, we are exempt from the imperatives of desire and the will; we are, for the moment, free.

But the episodic nature of aesthetic experience renders it incapable of providing any lasting solution to the problem of the will. For Schopenhauer—and it is here that he is close to the teaching of Buddhism—genuine salvation lies only in the definitive renouncing of the will and the emancipation from the will's imperatives. Just how this is to be accomplished remains somewhat obscure. Schopenhauer claims that the renunciation of the will "does not proceed directly from the will, but from a changed form of knowledge." Yet such emancipatory insight does not come about through any effort on the part of the individual; instead, it is said to be something akin to "what the Christian mystics call the *effect of grace.*"

What Schopenhauer proposes is less an emancipation *of* life than an emancipation *from* life. Yet the renunciation of the will he envisions has exerted such an irresistible fascination on so many artists, writers, and thinkers because it promises to relieve one of individuality, of the burden of having to be oneself. What aesthetic experience adumbrates the renunciation of the will fulfills: "we are, so to speak, rid of ourselves," he writes, gesturing toward a wholeness that mere life, with its kaleidoscope of tasks, projects, and desires, can never achieve.

Of course, from life's point of view, the renunciation of the will is tantamount to annihilation. "We freely acknowledge," Schopenhauer writes, "that what remains after the complete abolition of the will is, for all who are still full of the will, assuredly

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nothing. But also conversely, to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is—nothing." From *this* perspective, death appears as a form of redemption. Thus Mann's Thomas Buddenbrook, soon to confront his own demise, can stumble onto a volume of Schopenhauer, sit reading "for four hours, with growing absorption," and rhapsodize about death and the dissolution of individuality:

> What *was* Death? The answer came, not in poor, large-sounding words: he felt it within him, he possessed it. Death was a joy, so great, so deep that it could be dreamt of only in moments of revelation like the present. It was the return from an unspeakably painful wandering, the correction of a grave mistake, the loosening of chains, the opening of doors . . . . Individuality? — All, all that one is, can, and has, seems poor, grey, inadequate, wearisome; . . . .

Whatever one thinks of Schopenhauer's prescriptions for redemption, they make it difficult to accept Magee's claim that his pessimism is "logically independent" of his philosophy. "Non-pessimism," he tells us, "is equally compatible with his philosophy. The traditional identification of him as a pessimist is largely irrelevant to a serious consideration of him as a philosopher." In fact, Magee here betrays a radical misunderstanding of Schopenhauer's philosophy. For according to Schopenhauer, man is essentially will; and since he craves a satisfaction beyond the unappeasable urgings of the will, man must deny his essence in order to achieve happiness. "Existence is certainly to be regarded as an error or mistake," he tells us, "to return from which is salvation." This is the unavoidable, deeply pessimistic, core of his teaching.

But though pessimism is inseparable from Schopenhauer's philosophical *Weltanschauung,* it is possible to credit his description of man as a creature of will without therefore subscribing to pessimism or indulging in romantic *Todesliebe.* For one thing, as Magee astutely notes, there is a "disparity between the content of what Schopenhauer said . . . and the way he said it. The content was so often negative—corrosive, sarcastic, derisive, pessimistic, sometimes almost despairing—yet the manner was always positive, indeed exhilarating." Schopenhauer's exhilarating —and often witty—manner is one reason that his pessimism has been so attractive and influential—so, one might almost say, optimistic. For it is the *style* of Schopenhauer's pessimism that lets one understand how the young Nietzsche could endorse so pessimistic a thinker as one who exhibits "a cheerfulness that really cheers." In this respect, Schopenhauer's writing appeals to us perhaps more as art than as philosophy, affecting us, as Thomas Mann put it, "more through its passion than its wisdom."

Further, as Magee himself observes in his criticism of Schopenhauer's position, it is by no means clear that we should follow Schopenhauer in regarding the exercise of the will as something essentially negative. "We are indeed exhilarated by relief from pain or danger," Magee writes,

> but in the enjoyment of great art, or love, or friendship, there is something altogether more outgoing than this. These things involve us in a relationship with something or someone outside ourselves, a gratified extension of ourselves which is self-enhancing, and thus life-enhancing.

At bottom, though, we may also want to challenge Schopenhauer's identification of happiness with a "satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines." This in effect was what the mature Nietzsche did. In criticizing Schopenhauer's "romanticism"—what he referred to in *Ecce Homo* as "the cadaverous perfume of Schopenhauer"—Nietzsche did not take issue with his description of man as a creature of will. For Nietzsche, too, man is will incarnate, always striving, never satisfied. But he regarded this as the challenge, not the tragedy, of human existence. The tragedy lay in man's tendency to deny himself as will, in his attempt to extricate himself from the finitude of the human condi-

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tion. Goethe, who managed to live the world-affirming philosophy that Nietzsche preached, summed it up in an admonitory couplet that he wrote for Schopenhauer when the young philosopher was leaving Weimar for Dresden in 1814:

> Willst du dich des Lebens freuen,
> So musst der Welt du Werth verleihen.

"If you want to delight in life, then you must grant value to the world." But by making happiness incompatible with man's essence, Schopenhauer found himself deaf to Goethe's wisdom. "The world and life can afford us no true satisfaction," Schopenhauer insists, "and are therefore not worth our attachment to them." Saturated with what Nietzsche called the "rancor against time," Schopenhauer's philosophy, however fascinating, can only poison life, disparaging its real but always transitory pleasures for the dream of a will-less, timeless satisfaction that human life will never know.

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Max Beckmann

March 28–April 24

Grace Borgenicht Gallery

724 Fifth Ave New York 10019, 212/247-2111

Pencil, 11 x 8½ inches (sheet size)

ELIE NADELMAN

Drawings 1920–21
April

ZABRISKIE

724 Fifth Avenue, New York

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NELL BLAINE

Recent Paintings
Through April 24

Cleome in a Bright Bunch, 21 x 17 in, oil on canvas

FISCHBACH GALLERY *24 West 57 New York (212) PL9. 2345*

AUDREY USHENKO

April 9–27

VIRIDIAN GALLERY
52 West 57th St., New York 245-2882

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JOHN FERREN

Paintings 1950s-1960s

March 23–April 13

AM SACHS

980 Madison Avenue (76 St)
New York, NY 10021
Telephone (212) 734-7795

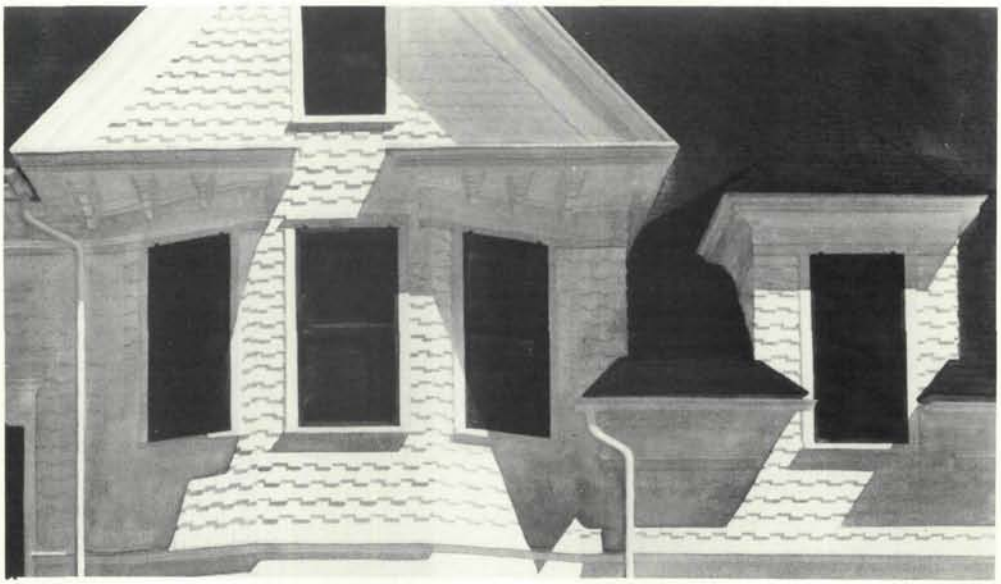
SALLY VAGLIANO

New Paintings

April 16 – May 4

AM SACHS

980 Madison Avenue (76 St)
New York, NY 10021
Telephone (212) 734-7795



DAVID DEWEY: Hackettstown, 1985. Watercolor on paper, 30″ X 40″, detail.

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David Ligare

Recent Paintings *March 30-April 24*

Landscape for Baucis and Philemon, 1984, oil on canvas, 32″ x 48″

Robert Schoelkopf Gallery ***50 W 57 NY 10019***

cora kelley ward

RECENT PAINTINGS & DRAWINGS

CURATED by KAREN WILKIN

APRIL 9 to APRIL 20

EXHIBITION SPACE at 112 Greene Street
New York, New York 212 966-3864
Gallery Hours Tuesday thru Saturday 10—6

Preview Tuesday April 9, 5-7 pm

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GREGORY AMENOFF

ROBERT MILLER · 724 FIFTH AVE · NEW YORK

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Indicative Displacement, 1947, soft ground etching, 10⅜" x 15⅝", Ed. 25

ALICE TRUMBULL MASON

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